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Degree: Master of Arts

Year this Degree Granted: 2001

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University of Alberta

Creating Identity: The Experience of Irish Dancing

by

Danica Marie Clark



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of Music

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2001

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Creating Identity: The Experience of Irish Dancing submitted by Danica Marie Clark in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Abstract

This thesis examines the experience of Irish dancing and how this experience shapes the identity of the participants involved. The Irish dancing community is made up of several participant groups including child dancers, parents, adult dancers, teachers, adjudicators, and musicians, and each group experiences Irish dancing in different yet similar ways. This study explores the key components of the Irish dancing experience including the dance itself, the accompanying music, the dance as a cultural activity, and the community of participants. It is an ethnographic examination of one Irish dancing school in the Western Canadian Irish Dancing Region, and is based on my own fieldwork completed between the fall of 1998 and the spring of 2001 at the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing, in Edmonton, Alberta.

Acknowledgments

Many people deserve thanks for assisting me with this project. Firstly, I would like to thank Merv Bell, TCRG and Patti Bell for welcoming me into their studio, answering my numerous questions, and facilitating my research over the past two and a half years. Secondly, I would like to thank the rest of the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing community for sharing their stories and opinions with me. This project would not have been possible without the extreme generosity of everyone at Mattierin. I would like to thank Michael Toal, ADCRG for sharing his perspective as an adjudicator of Irish dancing, as well as Ryan McCaffrey who provided me with an insider's glance at the world of professional Irish dancing.

I would like to thank my supporters at the University of Alberta. As a brilliant scholar, talented teacher and caring individual, Dr. Regula Qureshi has been an inspiration to me throughout my years at the U of A. Dr. Michael Frishkopf has been extremely supportive of this project, and I have appreciated his easy-going nature and his confidence in me. Dr. Andriy Nahachewsky has also been very helpful in this project, offering insightful advice and challenging me to think about dance in new ways. I would like to thank Dr. Catherine E. Foley, TCRG, Anthony McCann and Johanne Trew from the University of Limerick for sharing their insights into the academic literature on Irish music and dance, as well as their help with Irish terminology.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family who have provided encouragement and support throughout this project. To Rob Kelly, who gave me the idea of using the notion of 'experience' as a lens through which to view Irish dancing, and to

Joy-Anne Murphy and Darryl Dewalt who helped with the music transcriptions, I thank you. I would especially like to acknowledge my parents Michael and Caroline Clark, and my sister Heather Clark, for their constant love and support.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Setting the Stage

1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 What is Irish Dancing?	2
1.3 Developing a Theoretical Framework	8
1.4 Literature Review	12
1.5 The Mattierin School: Situating the Study Ethnographically	14
1.6 Methodology	16
1.7 Chapter Outline	21

Chapter 2: The Dance Itself

2.1 Introduction	23
2.2 Examining the Repertoire of Irish Dancing	24
2.2.1 Hard and Soft Shoe Dances	25
2.2.2 Set Dances	28
2.2.3 Figure/Ceili Dances	30
2.3 Dancing in Context	33
2.3.1 Dancing in Class	33
2.3.2 Dancing at a Feis	36
2.3.3 The Routine	41
2.4 <i>Riverdance</i>	44
2.5 Experiencing the Dance	47
2.6 Conclusion	51

Chapter 3: Irish Dance Music

3.1 Introduction	53
3.2 Music as a Governing Body	54
3.3 Instruments	60
3.4 Irish Dance Music, Both Live and Recorded	61
3.5 Experiencing the Music	65
3.6 Conclusion	70
Chapter 4: Irish Dancing as a Cultural Activity	
4.1 Introduction	72
4.2 What makes something culturally-specific?: Understanding the Model	72
4.3 Applying the Model	75
4.4 Cultural Constructions	81
4.5 Experiencing Culture	84
4.6 Conclusion	88
Chapter 5: The Irish Dancing Community	
5.1 Introduction	90
5.2 The Dance Class Community	92
5.3 The School Community	94
5.4 Attending Feiseanna: The Regional Irish Dancing Community	95
5.4.1 The Musicians	99
5.4.2 The Parents and Feis Volunteers	100
5.4.3 The Vendors	103
5.5 The World Irish Dancing Community	105

5.6 The Irish Sport and Social Society of Edmonton	109
5.7 Experiencing Community	112
5.8 Conclusion	121
Chapter 6: Conclusion	
6.1 Introduction	123
6.2 Results of the Study: The Irish Dancing Experience	124
6.3 A Vignette of Experience	127
6.4 What is left to be explored?	129
Bibliography	131
Select Discography of Irish Dance Music	137
Appendix 1: Set dances and Speeds	138

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Repertoire of Irish Step Dances	25
Figure 2: “The Walls of Limerick” Floor Plan	32
Figure 3: The Nahachewsky Model	73
Figure 4: Irish Dancing Communities	90

List of Musical Examples

Musical Example 1: “Red-Haired Boy” (Reel)	56
Musical Example 2: “Rakes of Kildare” (Jig)	57
Musical Example 3: “Road to Lisdoonvarna” (Single Jig)	57
Musical Example 4: “Barney Brallaghan” (Slip Jig)	58
Musical Example 5: “Rights of Man” (Hornpipe)	59

List of Terms

ADCRG (Ard Diploma Coimisiún Le Rinci Gaelacha). Highest Diploma in Gaelic Dancing. Designation given to an individual who has completed the required testing by the Irish Dancing Commission to be an adjudicator of Irish dancing.

An Coimisiún le Rinci Gaelacha or An Coimisiún Rince na hEireann. Commonly referred to as simply ‘An Coimisiún’ - Irish Dancing Commission.

ceili or ceilidh; ceilithe (Pl.). – pronounced KAY-lee; KAY-lee; KAY-lee-ha. 1) An Irish style gathering with traditional music, dancing and sometimes story-telling. 2) A type of dance that is performed at such gatherings.

feis; feiseanna (Pl.). – pronounced fesh; fesh-AA-na. Historically, a festival and competition for Irish music, dance, and story-telling. Now, it typically means a dance competition where competitors of varying abilities and ages gather to compete in various solo step dancing and figure dancing competitions. Dancers can qualify for the national championships at regional feiseanna.

oireachtas; oireachtais or oireachtaisi (Pl.). – pronounced uh-ROCK-tus; uh-ROCK-tish; uh-ROCK-tish-i. A large-scale feis that occurs once annually in every Irish dancing region. This is where dancers qualify for the World Championships.

Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne – World Irish Dancing Championships.

TCRG, (Teasgicoir Coimisiún Le Rinci Gaelacha). Gaelic Commission Dancing Teacher. Designation given to an individual who has completed the required testing by the Irish Dancing Commission to be a certified instructor of Irish dancing. A teacher must have this designation to enter his/her students into both solo and figure dancing competitions at registered feiseanna. Most registered Irish dancing teachers have a TCRG designation.

TMRF (Teastas Muinteoireacht Rinncidhe Foirne). Teaching Diploma in Irish Figure Dancing. Designation given to an individual who has completed the required testing by the Irish Dancing Commission to be a registered Irish dancing teacher of figure dancing. A teacher must have this designation to enter his/her students into figure dancing competitions at registered feiseanna. A teacher with a TMRF designation is not permitted to enter students into solo categories at registered feiseanna.

Chapter 1: Setting the Stage

1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the experience of Irish dancing and how this experience shapes the identity of the participants involved. The Irish dancing community is made up of several participant groups including child dancers, parents, adult dancers, teachers, adjudicators, and musicians, and each group experiences Irish dancing in different yet similar ways. In the introduction to The Anthropology of Experience, Edward M. Bruner states:

We know that participants in a performance do not necessarily share a common experience or meaning; what they share is only their common participation.
(1986: 11)

By exploring how different members of the Irish dancing community experience the dance, this thesis examines identity as realized through participation in Irish dancing.

Timothy Rice defines musical experience as “the history of the individual’s encounter with the world of musical symbols in which he finds himself (1994: 6).” Using this approach to experience, I have sought to delve into the Irish dancing experience and what it means to the various participant groups. The study addresses the four principal elements that make up the Irish dancing experience including: the dance itself, the accompanying music, the cultural aspects of the dance, and the community of participants. These elements combine to form an individual’s overall encounter with Irish dancing, which I argue, contributes to the individual’s personal identity, or sense of self.

By becoming an active participant of Irish dancing, an individual strengthens his or her personal identity as a member of the transnational Irish community within the context of a Canadian multi-cultural milieu. This community is not simply a diaspora group, as membership is not limited to individuals with an Irish heritage. In past decades, the Irish dancing community did consist almost exclusively of Irish descendants. Since *Riverdance*, however, the Irish dancing community has grown far beyond the confines of the Irish diaspora, attracting participants from a range of ethnic backgrounds. As a result, the current Irish dancing community is made up of both members of Irish descent and others with no Irish blood but with a passion for the music, dance and culture, thus creating a sort of multi-ethnic Irish community.

In addition to strengthening his or her Irish identity, a participant in Irish dancing also gains a sense of a dance identity by becoming a member of the broad community of Irish dancers and of or more of the smaller sub-groups within this overall Irish dancing community. This study is an ethnographic examination of one Irish dancing school in the Western Canadian Dancing Region, and is based on my own fieldwork completed between the fall of 1998 and the spring of 2001 at the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing in Edmonton, Alberta.

1.2 What is Irish dancing?

Due to the success of shows such as *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*, the popularity of Irish dancing has surged in the past decade. From its beginnings as a cultural form relatively unknown outside of Ireland, Irish dancing has become part of

Western popular culture. With growing interest in this dance form, more Irish dancing schools have cropped up across North America and the UK, competitions have grown, and more dancers have been able to make a living as professional performers.

Irish dancing is a general term used to denote folk dances that originated in Ireland. The term today, however, refers most often to the genre of Irish step dancing as taught in Irish dancing schools around the world and governed by the Irish Dancing Commission. Irish dancing schools have played a paramount role in the definition of technical standards, as well as in the transmission and dissemination of this dance form. Helen Brennan Corcoran describes Irish step dancing as:

[a] precise technical, rhythmic performance genre danced by either male or female, with kinesthetic activity occurring predominantly in leg movements. Particular dance contexts, categorizations, stylistic features and aesthetics distinguish and define this dance genre as Irish step dance. (1999: 380)

While there are several different types of Irish dancing¹, it is primarily step dancing which I treat in this thesis. There will be some discussion of Irish dancing beyond the parameters of step dancing, and these sections will be clearly marked in the text.

In order to paint a mental picture of the dance discussed in this thesis, I have included a descriptive passage from my fieldnotes of an eight and a half minute performance by the students of the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing. I have selected this excerpt because I believe it represents the primary elements of the Irish dancing experience. The passage illustrates the range of the dance repertoire and the accompanying musical forms, the range of age and ability in the dancers themselves, the

¹ Irish dancing can be divided into the basic categories of step dancing, set dancing, sean-nos dancing, as well as ceili and figure dancing.

presence of parents, teachers, musicians, and the role of the dance school as a icon of Irish culture in the Canadian multi-cultural milieu.

It is March 17th, 1999, St. Patrick's Day, and dancers from the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing are preparing to go on stage at the First Annual Edmonton St. Patrick's Day Ceili. An announcer introduces the group and passes the microphone to Merv Bell, director of the Mattierin School. Merv, seated with the other musicians on the left side of the stage, leans over the piano accordion in his lap and begins by introducing the band. "When we play dances we're known as 'The Celtics' but when we play for dancers, we try to think of something original; so tonight we're 'The New Celts on the Block'." This initial introduction is met with laughter and applause by the audience.

The routine begins with three girls aged eight to thirteen and adorned in brightly coloured costumes walking to the centre of the stage. The smallest girl, who is holding a penny whistle, stands between her two older sisters, who are holding fiddles. As soon as they take their places, a group of approximately twenty other dancers, ranging in age from eight to adult, join the trio. The dancers begin the performance in three lines facing the audience. They are each standing straight with their right legs crossed in front of their left, and both feet turned out; their arms are held loosely at their sides. The starting position for this performance has the dancers standing with their heads hanging down.

The music begins and the dancers raise their heads; the show has begun. The dancers move through a sequence of patterns on the floor, creating a fluid series of circular and line formations. The large group finishes their portion of the routine, and

continuing the sequence of patterns, moves off the platform, leaving the trio of dancer musicians standing in the centre of the stage.

The adult musicians at the side of stage stop playing, and all that is heard is the music of the young girls playing a slow melody. When they finish, the adult band continues the tune to a quick dance tempo, and the girls skip off the stage, passing their instruments to the waiting hands of parents at the back of the stage. Another group of eight girls comes onto the stage, four dancers from each side. The music changes meter and the girls circle around. They weave between one another clasping hands as they pass each other in the circle, and then join hands and circle around in one solid ring. The musical phrase finishes and the dancers hold their pose, arms linked, with dancers alternating between facing outwards and into the circle.

The music shifts seamlessly as each group of dancers enters and exits the stage, showing off the different steps and styles of the dance form. One of the highlights of the routine is a segment performed only by the few males in the dance school. The music shifts dramatically and two teenage boys march onto the platform, turn sharply to face the audience, and immediately begin their tandem dance. This high-energy dance is met with cheers from the audience that continue throughout the first half of their segment. Clad in black trousers and black shirts with tiny embroidered orange, green and silver Celtic crosses down the front, the boys bodies are immobile from the waist up. Their arms are held at their sides and their heads face forward. From the waist down, however, their footwork is a complex combination of leaps, high kicks, and foot slides. With the weight of their bodies balanced on their toes, the boys' dance is silent except for the sound of their heels as they click in mid-air. As the boys finish their display of skill

and agility, a four-year-old girl emerges from between them. Dressed in a white blouse, green jumper, white socks and dancing shoes, she points her right toe and begins to dance. The audience, somewhat astounded by this tiny Irish dancer, roars with applause. She finishes her dance, bows to the audience, and the teenage boys move forwards to take her hands; they bow together and dance off the stage.

The next segment welcomes the most senior dancers to the stage. The young fiddlers from the beginning of the routine emerge at the sides of the stage, with two rows of five dancers between the duo. A familiar dance tune echoes through the venue, as the shoes of the dancers outline the complex rhythms of the music. The dancers move between the double line formation and a tri-circular pattern on the floor, anchored by a solo dancer, who dances on the spot at centre front of the stage. The segment ends and the senior dancers exit the stage as a group of younger dancers are waiting to begin their next dance.

The music shifts again, and out leap eight young girls from the sides of the stage. They perform a series of balletic steps in circular and cross-wise patterns on the floor, their footwork shifting between graceful leaps and small steps 'en pointe.' The girls are clad in dark green dresses with intricate patterns of Celtic knots embroidered on the bodice, on the white satin cuffs of the sleeve, and on the trim of the skirt. The skirts of the dresses are split into stiff triangular panels that fly up during the dancing, exposing brilliant orange satin bloomer shorts underneath. Embroidered on the panels of the skirt are elaborate Celtic crosses in light green, orange and silver. On the back of the dresses are capes, large triangular pieces of stiff dark green fabric, accented with white satin trim. The capes, or braths, are decorated with the same large Celtic cross that is

featured on the centre front panel of the skirts. The dancers' legs are bare, and on their feet they wear white textured socks. The girls' hair, which falls in tiny ringlets of curl, is swept off their faces and secured with white fabric-covered elastics. The girls finish their portion of the routine and the finale begins.

The senior dancers take the stage again, and two women wearing short black dresses with lace sleeves and black tights move from their places in the line of dancers to the front of the stage. Thus begins a call-response dialogue between the bodhran² players in the band and the percussion of the dancers' shoes striking the floor. The drummers play one phrase of rhythmic patterns that the dancers imitate, first together, then one beginning the phrase and the other ending it, and then together again. The two women dance on the spot, facing the audience, their backs erect and their arms held by their sides. The complexity of this dance is not in the visual elements such as leaps or patterns on the floor, but rather in the sonic effect of the rhythms that the footwork produces.

After three rhythmic interchanges, the nine other dancers from the line advance to reform the line with the two women, answering the next rhythmic call of the drummers. The accordion, fiddle and guitar join the bodhrans in a rousing tune, the excitement of the finale enhanced by the chorus of dancing feet. The sonic effect of the driving rhythm of the dancers' footwork and the stunning visual effect of the chorus-line row of dancers with their legs moving in perfect synchronism combine to bring the audience to a climax finish. The eight and a half minute long routine is met with thunderous applause.

² The bodhran is a hand-held frame drum that is beat with the hand or with a stick, while the other hand moves across the back of the drum head to alter the pitch.

Watching a performance like this one invites several questions. Is there a community beyond the individual dance school that supports Irish dancing-related activities? Is the community made up exclusively of Irish people and their descendants? If these dance routines are only seen occasionally during the year at different public events, what does the rest of the dancers' year entail? Is there a standard repertoire of dances? How are they taught? What is the role of the different types of music heard, and how do they relate to the dancing itself? What makes this type of dancing Irish? In short, what is the Irish dancing experience, and furthermore, how does this experience relate to the collective and individual identities of those who participate in the dance form?

1.3 Developing a Theoretical Framework

By selecting a city in Western Canada as a site of study for an inquiry into Irish dancing, issues of identity and ethnicity cannot be overlooked. Martin Stokes argues that

music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides a means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them. (1994: 4)

This is particularly true in the case of a multi-cultural population. In areas outside of Ireland, participating in Irish music and dance become ways that individuals strengthen their sense of their own Irishness and link themselves to other members of the transnational Irish community. To investigate this sense of identity and how it is reached

among participant groups within the Irish dancing community, I have chosen to probe into the various aspects that make up the Irish dancing experience.

The institutionalization of Irishness, in this case, through Irish dancing schools and competitions, becomes an important measure in maintaining a strong link to Ireland. Established in 1929 and based in Ireland, the Irish Dancing Commission is an international organization that monitors and regulates Irish dancing worldwide. This is done primarily through the strict regulation of competitions, resulting in a highly structured dance form. What was once a folk art form, not regimented and performed primarily for aesthetic and recreational purposes, is now a disciplined education system in which a dancer can learn the prescribed steps and dances and advance to higher levels in this system through competition. Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept of 'invented tradition' (1983) is useful for understanding the creation of a single institutionalized style of Irish dancing out of a variety of regional styles. This elevation of Irish dancing from its humble roots to its status as a national symbol echoes the rise of ballet in the French court of Louis XIV. Carol Lee writes that "the king judged in its fullest flower, ballet could be an auspicious means for reducing factional, domestic strife and building national prestige (1999: 66)." In an attempt to gain control of the French nobility, Louis XIV institutionalized ballet, asserting control over the development of the dance form.

The institutionalization of Irish dance can also be understood in terms of the evolution of the canon of Western classical music. The concept of 'the canon of Western classical music,' as discussed by various music scholars in the 1992 book Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons (Bergeron and Bohlman, Eds.), is a useful model for understanding the institutionalization of Irish dancing. In the same way that

musicologists determine what composers and what works are admitted into the canon of Western classical music, the Irish Dancing Commission serves as the authoritative institution that decides what is Irish dancing and what is not.

In the introduction to the book Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, James Clifford discusses the concept of ‘culture.’

If “culture” is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation - both by insiders and outsiders – is implicated in this emergence. (1986: 19)

This interpretation of ‘culture’ is insightful as it allows for flexibility of interpretation both between individuals as well as for the same individual over a period of time.

Because this study explores the range of experiences of different participant groups in Irish dancing, I have chosen to use this interpretation of ‘culture’ which empowers the participants, myself included, to actively define and create his or her own sense of culture.

In his examination of ethnic dance within the North American milieu, Andriy Nahachewsky argues that “the terms ‘ethnic’ and ‘Canadian/American’ are not alternative identities, but clearly compatible and often simultaneous (2000).” In his examination of staged Ukrainian and Irish dance shows, Nahachewsky maintains that there are three components involved in the term ‘culture-specific’: geographic affiliation, affiliation by derivation, and symbolic affiliation (2000). Using this model, I will attempt to explore the elements of Irish dancing that make it Irish within its Canadian context.

The Irish dancing community is a multi-leveled structure. Employing a simple model of concentric circles to delineate the levels of community from the intimate dance

class community to the worldwide network of Irish dancers is to ignore the complex relationships that occur across the levels of structure. These relationships which are manifest through the various venues in which Irish dancing takes place, are crucial to the understanding of the hierarchical structure of Irish dancing education and how the levels of organization relate to each other. Thomas Turino argues that *context* may be understood as “an ever-expanding series of concentric rings with pathways that cross and connect them (1990: 400).” This model is an appropriate metaphor for examining the intersection of various social groups within the greater Irish dancing community. Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined community’ (1991) and Arjun Appadurai’s notion of ‘global ethnoscapes’ (1996) are also valuable concepts for investigating the broadest levels of the Irish dancing community.

The Irish dancing experience is a dynamic combination of elements including the dance itself, music, its role as a cultural activity, and the community of participants. By gaining an appreciation of the interplay of these fundamental elements of the Irish dancing experience, new issues of identity arise, the primary consideration being the treatment of an Irish identity within the Canadian multi-cultural context. In his book Ethnic Groups in Canada: Adaptations and Transitions Edward N. Herberg asserts that in Canada, the general criterion in assessing an individual’s membership in an ethnic group is “based on their own perception of their origins (1989: 3).” Regula Burckhardt Qureshi acknowledges the challenges of doing ethnomusicological research in Canada as the line between researcher and informant is often blurred. She asserts that “doing ethnic music research is thus the process of relating to the makers of ethnic music as members of the same larger community, which, of course, is Canada (1994: 347).” While this blurring of

boundaries has certainly demanded careful consideration in my own research, I believe it has also strengthened the inquiry, raising issues of identity that may have been absent outside of the Canadian multi-cultural milieu.

1.4 Literature Review

Considering the popularity of Irish dancing worldwide, the academic literature on this dance form is remarkably small. The late Breandán Breathnach, a musician and scholar of Irish traditional music, was widely considered to be one of the leading experts in the field of Irish traditional music. Two of his works, Folk Music and Dances of Ireland and Dancing in Ireland are quoted in nearly every subsequent scholar's work on Irish dancing. These volumes give a brief overview of music and dance in Ireland, providing a basic introduction to the dance forms and a historical account of their development. More recently, Fintan Vallely, also a musician and scholar of Irish traditional music, edited a dictionary-encyclopedia entitled Irish Traditional Music. This volume brings together the expertise of over one hundred individuals on a number of topics related to Irish traditional music. The entries on dance, ceili dance, step dance, and set dance are all helpful in addressing different sub-sections within the broader topic of Irish dancing.

Some academic work, mostly unpublished, has been done on historical and stylistic analysis of Irish dancing in different areas of Ireland and the United States. Catherine E. Foley's work focuses on the region of North Kerry. Her PhD dissertation is a structural and contextual analysis of Irish step dancing in this area. Kathleen M.

Flanagan's PhD dissertation takes an historical look at the development and promotion of Irish dancing in Chicago from 1893 to 1953. Reginald Richard Hall's PhD dissertation is a socio-cultural history of Irish music and dance in London from 1890 to 1970. Richard Carter Crawford Jr. examines stylistic changes in Irish dancing in his MFA thesis entitled "The Modernization of Irish dance: An Exposition of Recent Changes." Marion McAuley's MA thesis also deals with stylistic changes, although her work focuses on Irish dance music and not the dance itself.

Frank Hall's PhD dissertation "Irish Dancing: Discipline as Art, Sport, and Duty" examines Irish dancing through an anthropological lens. The fieldwork for this research was done in Galway, Ireland. While the work includes structural analysis of the dance, illustrated using Laban notation, it also examines Irish dancing and its relationship to Irish culture and society at large.

In addition to this body of unpublished academic literature on Irish dancing, there is another body of works that are useful in researching the dance form. The majority of writings on Irish dancing are intended not for an academic audience, but rather a readership of Irish dancing connoisseurs and aficionados. John Cullinane, ADCRG, is the most prolific author of material on Irish dancing. A certified adjudicator, he has written a number of short books on the dance form. His first book Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing, which includes entries by other authors, provides a brief overview of the historical development of Irish dancing in Ireland and beyond. His other books focus on the dance form in different regions including Australia, North America, and one book specifically on New York. He has also written books that address specific elements of

the form including costumes and ceili dancing. These books are an extremely useful resource when seeking factual information about contemporary Irish dancing worldwide.

Other books written by connoisseurs of Irish dancing that deal with different aspects of the dance form include O'Keefe and O'Brien (1964), Pat Murphy (1995)³, Carty O'Brien (1987), Robb (1998) and Smyth (1996). This second body of literature is intended for a readership outside of academia, predominantly members of the worldwide Irish dancing community. Still, these publications are a useful resource in providing a detailed account of several aspects of Irish dancing, both historical and contemporary.

My thesis builds on the body of knowledge in the field of Irish dancing as developed through the previously-mentioned works. It adds, however, a new Canadian voice. The study looks at one Irish dancing school as it is situated within the context of the Canadian multi-cultural milieu. Pertinent to this inquiry is the school's student population, which is not made up entirely of Irish people and Irish descendants, but also includes members with no Irish heritage. For many of these participants, the adoption of an Irish identity evolves through their experience of the dance. By viewing Irish dancing through the lens of experience, I address issues of identity, ethnicity and 'adopted ethnicity,' in a specifically Canadian context.

1.5 The Mattierin School: Situating the Study Ethnographically

The site of study for my research on Irish dancing is the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing, located in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The school was founded in 1994 by Merv Bell, TCRG. Currently there are three teachers at the Mattierin School, Merv and

³ Murphy's work discusses set dancing as opposed to step dancing.

his wife Patti (nee O'Donnell), as well as Kathryn Tomlinson (nee McManus). The school runs classes three evenings per week and on the weekends. The ninety-plus students range in age from three to over fifty years of age. The majority of Mattierin students are thirteen years old and younger; however, there are over twenty-five adult students.

When I asked Merv why he and Patti teach dancing, he replied that it is because they love it. He went on to say that “even if *Riverdance* had never come along, we would be doing it [dancing and teaching dance] anyway.” The main goal of the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing is to teach the dance and have fun. The three teachers all share a passion for the music and the dance, and hope to instil this same love and passion for the forms in their students, while all the time making the learning process fun.

The Emerald Isle Dancers Association (EIDA) is an organization of parent volunteers whose primary function is to raise money for the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing. At the beginning of the dancing year, the EIDA collects membership fees from each family of dancers. This mandatory membership fee entitles the dancers to borrow a school uniform for performances and competitions throughout the year. It also entitles the family to reduced membership fees to the local Irish Sport and Social Society. In addition to organizing the distribution of costumes, the EIDA organizes fundraising initiatives, plans events such as the year-end school ceili, and does other tasks to facilitate the business of the dancing school, thus allowing Merv and Patti more time to concentrate on teaching and choreography. The EIDA, which is made up of an elected executive, as well as several coordinators and committees, meets on a monthly basis.

The Mattierin School, even in its young existence, plays a vital role in the Edmonton Irish community. The school's performance troupe (referred to simply as the Routine) dances at numerous functions throughout the year, with a particular intensity around St. Patrick's Day. The Routine has performed at City Hall, the Celtic Hall, O'Byrne's Irish pub, the Emerald Ball, the Edmonton St. Patrick's Day Parade and Ceili, as well as at numerous schools and nursing homes.

Mattierin has a strong relationship with the Irish Sport and Social Society of Edmonton (ISSS). The two organizations are mutually supportive of the other's endeavours. Mattierin is often invited to perform at the ISSS functions, from parties at the club itself, to dancing on the ISSS float in the St. Patrick's Day parade, and on the Irish pavilion stage at Heritage Days, a local multi-cultural summer festival. Perhaps the most significant joint effort between Merv Bell and the ISSS is the organization of an annual feis that attracts dancers from around the Western Canadian Irish Dancing Region. By selling ISSS memberships to dancing families at September registration, Mattierin encourages the link between the Irish dancing community and the rest of the local Irish community.

1.6 Methodology

When I began taking Irish dancing classes three years ago, I had no intention of making it the focus of my Master's thesis. Being a singer, I had intended to study Irish vocal music, and dancing was simply going to be my extra-curricular activity. For years, I had been impressed by the dance form and wanted to learn how to execute the steps that

accompanied a music that I already loved. I looked forward to the weekly classes, and to spending time with my fellow adult dancers who shared my passion for Irish music and culture.

By joining the adult beginner class at the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing, I became part of the Irish dancing community. Like my fellow classmates, and the members of other classes in my school, I was now an Irish dancer. This provided me with basic entry into the Irish dancing community. In this way, Merv and Patti Bell were, for me, the ‘gatekeepers’ to the Irish dancing community, facilitating my research by welcoming me into their studio to both learn and observe.

As I became more involved with Irish dancing, I realized that there was much more to learning the dance form than simply learning how to move my body. I was gaining a more in-depth understanding of the music, a heightened awareness of Irish culture, as well as a new access to the local Irish community and the larger communities of Irish dancing. Because I had not grown up participating in Irish dancing like so many dancers my age, I took nothing for granted. I was a fresh eye, ready to observe the range of activities, social structures, and elements beyond the actual dancing.

Spradley writes that:

[t]he participant observer comes to a social situation with two purposes: (1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation. The ordinary participant comes to that same situation with only one purpose: to engage in the appropriate activities. (1980: 54)

My primary method of research for this project was participant-observation. By taking classes and being a dancer myself, I was able to gain access to the community of

Irish dancers. Similar to the experience of learning dancing in a group setting, Jeff Todd Titon writes of the experience of music making.

The experience of music making is, in some circumstances in various cultures throughout the world, an experience of becoming a knowing self in the presence of other becoming, knowing selves. (1997: 99)

Even though I was still a beginner, the activity of Irish dancing provided a common ground, or common experience, for me to converse with other dancers from beginners to professionals. Still, to gain an appreciation for the various participant groups within the greater Irish dancing community, being a dancer was not enough.

As a beginner adult dancer, there is little opportunity for performing with the Mattierin Routine. However, I attended many performances by the Routine over the past two years, observing how the performances were received by the different audiences, and having conversations with the parents who had also come to watch. Observing these performances gave me the chance to build relationships with several parents in the school, gaining their insight and learning about their personal experiences of the Irish dancing community.

My role as a scholar also helped me gain access to different participant groups. Because I was doing research for an academic program, I was able to move beyond my place as an adult Irish dancer. Within the Irish dancing community, adult dancers are generally viewed as individuals who are interested in Irish dancing but who are not 'serious' about it. To be 'serious' about Irish dancing and make it a professional career requires that a dancer begin training in early childhood. As a result, adult dancers do not usually socialize with champion dancers, even if they are close in age. As a scholar, I was considered 'serious' about Irish dancing. As a result, I was able to converse with

champion dancers and professionals in the field of Irish dancing and learn about their experiences growing up in the Irish dancing community.

Being a professional musician and performer of traditional Irish music has also helped me to move beyond my place as a beginner adult dancer, and reach new groups within the Irish dancing community and the local Irish community. Throughout my time as a student at the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing, I have had several opportunities to perform, both solo and with other local Irish traditional musicians. Although my primary reason for participating in these often impromptu performances has been for enjoyment, I believe that this participation has aided my research by making me a visible part of the community. As in other communities that are closely tied to competition, often only the top dancers are recognizable to the majority of the Irish dancing community. As a beginner dancer, I would never have gained the recognition by other members of the Irish dancing community that was granted to me as a singer of Irish traditional music.

In addition to participant-observation, much of my research is based on interviews with different members of the Irish dancing community. My criteria for selecting individuals to interview was based primarily on which participant group the individual was a part of. I did not base my work on surveys or other methods of quantitative research. Instead, this project is based on qualitative research collected from a number of individuals over the course of two and a half years. I have had conversations with teachers, professional dancers, an adjudicator, a musician, as well as several child dancers, adult dancers and parents. I believe that these individuals provide an accurate representation of the various participant groups in the Western Canadian Irish Dancing Region.

I have found it useful to employ a number of methods of documentation throughout the course of my research for this project. For spoken interviews, I used audiocassettes for documentation because I was concerned that using a video camera would be too obtrusive to the conversations. Some individuals who shared their experiences with me were uncomfortable with being taped at all, and for these interactions, I recorded the conversations on paper.

I have used a video camera to document a variety of events including performances by the Mattierin dance troupe at festivals and banquets, workshops, formal gatherings such as ceilithe, and impromptu dance-related activities such as a music session in a hotel room at a feis, or warm-ups in the lobby, etc. An Coimisiún, The Irish Dancing Commission, does not permit video recording at feiseanna during dance competitions. I have relied primarily on the use of still photography, fieldnotes and hand-drawn pictures to document these events. I did however receive permission to use video to document other elements of feiseanna outside of the actual dancing competitions. These situations include taping the market area outside of the competition rooms, the announcing of competition results, the venues before the actual competitions started, etc.

Fieldnotes have also played an important role in my research. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw write that “ongoing reflection and analysis, even as the fieldworker continues to observe in the field and to actively write fieldnotes, is crucial for ethnographic research (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995: 105).” Because my research has been an ongoing process for nearly three years, field notes have helped me to focus my topic of study. By putting onto paper things that I see and hear at competitions, in class, and at other

dancing related events, I have been able to assess which areas are, for me, the most interesting, multi-faceted and worthwhile topics of study.

1.7 Chapter Outline

While the first chapter has served as a brief introduction to this project and my site of study, the next four chapters delve into the key components that make up the overall experience of Irish dancing. Chapter two examines the dance itself. The chapter starts with a brief overview of distinguishing characteristics of the dance and the role of the Irish Dancing Commission in regulating the dance form. The next section explores the repertoire of Irish step dancing and the different sub-sections within that repertoire. The second half of the chapter examines the dance as it is performed in different venues including in the dance class, at a feis, within the performance routine by the Mattierin troupe, and in large-scale shows such as *Riverdance*.

Chapter three focuses on Irish dance music, an element that is inseparable from the dance itself. This chapter examines music as a governing body over the dance and explores the different subsections of the repertoire of Irish dance music. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of different musical instruments, as well as an inquiry into live and recorded music in various Irish dancing performance and practice situations.

Using a model developed by Andriy Nahachewsky, chapter four examines what makes Irish dancing ‘Irish.’ The chapter begins with a brief explanation of the model, followed by its application to the Irish dancing community. This chapter explores how different elements of the Irish dancing community figure in the experience of Irish

dancing as a cultural activity, ultimately contributing to the sense of an Irish identity gained by the participants involved.

Chapter five explores the many levels of community from the intimate dance class to the network of Irish dancers and enthusiasts worldwide. In addition to exploring the different levels of communities of dancers, this chapter also addresses other participant groups such as teachers, musicians, adjudicators, and how they figure in the overall dancing community. Included in this chapter is also a discussion of the local Irish community and its relationship with the Irish dancing community.

Each chapter discusses one of the key components of what makes up the experience of Irish dancing. The chapters begin with an informative review of the various elements, and end with a discussion of how the different participant groups within the Irish dancing community including adult dancers, child dancers, teachers, adjudicators, musicians and parents experience these elements. Chapter six provides a summary of the ethnographic study, focusing on the relationship between the Irish dancing experience and the Canadian multi-cultural milieu in which it is manifest.

Chapter 2 - The Dance Itself

2.1 Introduction

Eric Hobsbawm defines ‘invented tradition’ as:

includ[ing] both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period - a matter of a few years perhaps - and establishing themselves with great rapidity. (1983: 1)

Irish dancing, as it is taught and performed today, is an ‘invented tradition.’ The Gaelic League, an organization founded in 1893 and dedicated to the revival and preservation of Irish language and culture, established the Irish Dancing Commission in 1929 to monitor the development of this dance form (Cullinane, 1987: 1). Like the French court’s drive to formalize ballet instruction, the political impetus on the part of the Gaelic League to institutionalize Irish dancing was an effort to elevate the status of the dance form in Ireland and beyond. In both cases, the standardization of the dance forms has led to a narrowing of style and the establishment of a canon.

What was once a dance form performed across Ireland in a variety of regional styles has become a highly organized style with a strict governing body, the Irish Dancing Commission. This organization is able to define what is considered Irish dancing through competition. According to the Commission, only dancers who study under a certified instructor are allowed to compete in feiseanna. The Commission also monitors which dances and which steps are permissible in competition. These decisions by the Irish Dancing Commission have created a body of repertoire and dance gestures that together form the Irish dancing canon. Philip Bohlman writes:

In whatever way the canonizers of music engage in the process of canon formation, they do so effectively only when they wield some kind of power and maintain some basis of authority. (1992: 206)

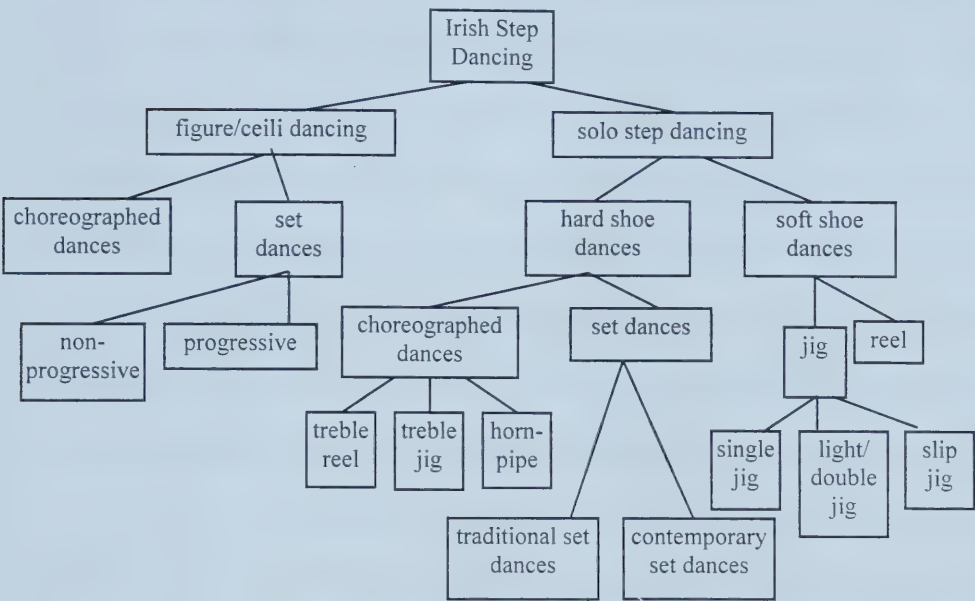
The Irish Dancing Commission retains its authority by controlling who is able to teach Irish dancing. The TCRG (certified teacher of Irish dancing) and ADCRG (certified adjudicator of Irish dancing) designations hold much weight in the Irish dancing community. With a vigorous testing process to obtain such certifications, the Irish Dancing Commission is able to eliminate teachers who do not sustain the goals of the organization. It becomes the mission of the certified adjudicators to regulate the canon of the dance form by deciding what will be considered allowable in competition and what will not, essentially what is Irish dancing and what is not. Frank Hall writes:

As the judges regularize the standards and dancers imitate winners, the form becomes more and more narrowly defined. Variation is limited to the aspects of the form which have not been regulated to standards of evaluation. Thus it is through the establishment of the Irish Dancing Commission that adjudicators align their standards to reward one style of dancing and eliminate others. (1996: 260)

2.2 Examining the Repertoire of Irish Dancing

Irish step dancing refers to the repertoire of solo and figure dances. The repertoire of Irish step dancing can be divided into the following categories.

Figure 1: The Repertoire of Irish Step Dances



The first division of repertoire is between solo step dancing and the ceili/figure dancing that is done in groups of two or more dancers. This division of the repertoire is based solely on the number of participants in the dance. The next major division of the repertoire of solo step dancing is based on the type of footwear worn to perform the dance.

2.2.1 Hard and Soft Shoe Dances

There are two types of dancing shoes worn in Irish dancing, soft shoes and hard shoes. These are regulated by the Irish Dancing Commission. Soft shoes are similar to

ballet slippers. For women, they are black leather slippers with black laces that lace back and forth across the top of the foot in the space where the leather does not cover; these shoes are called ghillies. The laces are either tied around the ankle or wrapped under the arch of the foot and tied on top. The soles of the ghillies are leather, often reinforced with a thicker piece of leather on the ball of the foot. For men, soft shoes are similar to jazz dancing shoes. They are also black leather but are not opened at the top of the foot like the women's ghillies. For men, the leather shoe covers the whole foot and laces back and forth across the foot. The sole is leather, although a hard piece is attached to the heel of the leather shoe so that men can click their heels together during soft shoe dances, adding a percussive element that is absent from women's soft shoe dancing.

Hard shoes for both men and women are made of black leather, cover the whole foot, and lace up across the top of the foot. Fiberglass heel and toe wedges are attached to the sole of the shoe. These pieces allow the dancer to make percussive sounds by clicking the feet together and striking the floor with the shoe. In the past, this effect was achieved by adding nails to regular shoes.⁴

The soles of the hard shoes range in flexibility from thick leather soles, which give much support but very little flexibility, to suede soles, which allow maximum flexibility in the arch of the foot. The beginner dancer will usually opt for the less flexible shoe with more support. Because the beginner dancer has not had years of training to build up the foot muscles, this support is encouraged, and teachers suggest the less flexible soles. For the more experienced dancer who has already built up strong foot

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the development of Irish dancing shoes, see Cullinane, 1987: 69.

muscles, the support is less important than the flexibility needed to make the sharpest toe point possible, and to execute the more elaborate dancing moves.

Soft shoe dances consist of two main types, jigs and reels. The category of jigs may be divided further into three types: the single jig, the double or light jig, and the slip jig. The differences between these three types of jigs, based on rhythm and meter, will be discussed in Chapter Three. Soft shoe dances are more graceful than the hard shoe dances as they involve more leaping movements and light quick footwork rather than the percussive striking of the feet against the floor that dominates the hard-shoe style of Irish dancing.

One of the primary goals in the performance of soft shoe dances, in addition to gaining as much height as possible in jumps and leg lifts, is to cover as much of the floor as possible. Soft shoe dances combine steps that emphasize height, such as jumps and kicks, with other steps, such as skips, in which dancers can travel quite far across the stage in only a few beats of music.

In soft shoe dancing, the dancer moves generally forward, to the side, or diagonally forward. The dancer does not move backwards, aside from the occasional step, such as the basic jig step, where the dancer moves only one or two paces backwards. As a result, the dancer must turn his or her back to the audience when moving towards the back of the stage. Turning one's back to the audience enables the dancer to move quickly and easily to the back of the stage, while allowing the audience to see the dancer from every angle.

The repertoire of hard shoe dances includes the hornpipe, treble reel, treble jig, and set dances. Hard shoe dances require the utmost precision in creating complex

rhythmic patterns. While visual appeal is important, the emphasis when performing or watching hard shoe dances is on the aural. As in the soft shoe dances, a dancer still tries to cover as much of the floor as possible. However, broad travelling steps where a dancer moves across the floor are fewer in the hard shoe dances. Instead, intricate foot movements and the rhythmic patterns created by the shoes striking the floor and each other are highly favoured. Historically, solo Irish dancing was done in one spot where a dancer performed entire dances barely moving from his or her place on the floor.

Because of the skill and practice required for their correct performance, the solo dances were held in most esteem, and often the trap or half door was taken down off its hinges, or the table cleared, in order to provide a suitable platform for a good solo dancer. (Breathnach, 1971: 53)

In hard shoe dancing, the dancer does not generally turn his or her back to the audience. Because hard shoe dancing emphasizes movement of the feet over leaps and lifting of the full body, it serves no purpose for the audience to see the back of the dancer. Instead the dancer moves forward, to the sides, and diagonally forward. This allows the audience to see the extension of the legs in kicks, while always keeping a close eye on the intricate movements of the feet.

2.2.2 Set Dances

‘Set dances’ here refers to a repertoire of solo hard shoe dances. A set dance is a dance that is always performed to a specific dance tune; this differs from the rest of the repertoire of solo dances including reels, jigs, and hornpipes which can be performed to any number of different dance tunes. Set dances employ either a jig or a hornpipe

rhythm. The set dance tune “Is the Big Man Within” uses both the jig (6/8 time) and slip jig (9/8 time) meters; it is the only set dance in the repertoire that changes meter within a single dance. Most set dances have two parts, with eight or twelve measures of music in the first part and twelve, fourteen, sixteen or more measures of music in the second part. “It is in the elongation of the second part of the music that the chief characteristic of a set dance lies (Cullinane, 1987: 74).” Set dances share their names with the dance tunes that accompany them.

Until very recently, there were four set dances that were considered to be ‘traditional set dances’: “St. Patrick’s Day,” “The Blackbird,” “Garden of Daisies,” and “Job of Journeywork.” Traditional set dances are always performed with the same choreography and tune, although the speed may vary slightly from dancer to dancer. Usually the first traditional set dance that a dancer learns is “St. Patrick’s Day” because it is the easiest to learn. In the more advanced levels, a dancer will learn one or more of the remaining traditional set dances. John Cullinane writes that these dances were selected to be a compulsory portion of the An Coimisiún exam and feis programs in the late 1970s. He explains that while the selection of the dances from the repertoire was subjective, the decision to designate certain dances as traditional sets was “taken in an effort to preserve some pieces of our dancing heritage and to keep dancers and teachers in contact with the original style and movements (Cullinane, 1987: 81-82).” As of January 1, 2001, two more dances have been added to the repertoire of traditional set dances, “King of the Fairies” which is a hornpipe, and “Jockey to the Fair” which is a jig.

In the highest levels of competitions, dancers have the option of dancing a contemporary set dance. These are danced to a set tune, although their choreography is not standard but rather, created by the dancer and/or the dancer's teacher.

In [contemporary set dances] the dancer is performing to a prescribed tune, so that the footwork and movements of the dance are expected more fully to interpret the tune than in an ordinary jig or hornpipe. (Cullinane, 1987: 75)

In the choreography of a set dance, the footwork is intended to interpret the tune, either thematically, or more often, rhythmically. For example, the sound of the dancers steps may echo the rhythmic patterns heard in the music. There are thirty contemporary set tunes, although only a portion of this repertoire tends to be used. Some of the more common set tunes are "Miss Brown's Fancy," "The Orange Rogue," "Three Sea Captains," "Hurry the Jug," "The Drunken Gauger," "The Blackthorn Stick," "The Ace and Deuce of Piping," and "The Downfall of Paris."

2.2.3 Figure/Ceili Dances

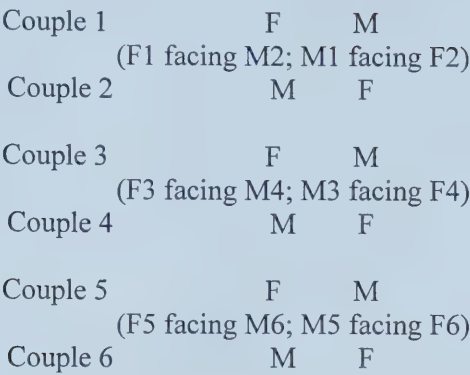
Figure dancing, also called ceili dancing, is the second main division of the repertoire of Irish dances. Figure dancing is done in groups of two or more dancers, and is the portion of the repertoire of Irish dancing that incorporates hand and arm movements. The footwork of figure dancing employs the basic steps of the solo Irish dancing repertoire. Figure dances, which are danced in soft shoes, can be divided into two main categories, choreographed dances and set dances.

Choreographed dances employ choreography that the dancers or their teachers have created. Most often dancers use their school's choreography that has been developed by their teachers. Occasionally however, more experienced dancers create their own steps or modify school steps to create their own dances. The two-hand and three-hand reels are the most common choreographed figure dances. They are danced by two and three dancers respectively. In large feiseanna, there is occasionally a competition for choreographed six-hand reels, although such competitions are rare.

More commonly, dances that employ more than three dancers are set figure dances. These dances, which are taught by Irish dancing teachers around the world, have a pre-determined choreography that is performed to either jig or reel music, depending on the dance. Some of the more common set figure dances include the four-hand reel, the six-hand reel which is commonly called "the Fairy Reel," "the High Caul Cap" which is an eight-hand reel, "The Trip to the Cottage" which is an eight-hand jig, and "The Three Tunes" which combines reel and jig music. All of these dances are performed with a predetermined number of dancers.

Progressive dances make up another branch of set figure dances; these dances do not restrict the number of dancers that may participate. Progressive dances are usually danced in couples or foursomes, with these groups facing one another in a line. For example, "The Walls of Limerick" is performed in couples. One couple will face another couple, while two other couples stand facing each other behind them in a line. Figure 2 demonstrates how the couples are aligned for this dance. In the diagram, M designates 'male' and F designates 'female.' Usually there are more female dancers than males, so often some females take the place of the males in the execution of the dance.

Figure 2: “The Walls of Limerick” Floor Plan



The dance begins with Couples 1 and 2 dancing together, Couples 3 and 4 dancing together and Couples 5 and 6 dancing together. The groups complete the sequence of steps of the dance. The final step of this sequence is a swing where the dancers dance with their partners, circling the couple that they just finished dancing with, and ending up one position ahead of where they started. In this example, Couple 1 now assumes the position of Couple 3, and Couple 3 the position of Couple 5. The even numbered couples all advance one position in the opposite direction. Couple 6 is now in the place of Couple 4, and Couple 4 in the place of Couple 2, etc. When a couple arrives at the end of the line, they simply turn around and make their way back in the line, dancing in the opposite direction from which they started.

The dance continues until the couple that started the dance at one end of the room makes it to the other end of the room, at which point they have danced with all the other couples present. Often, if there are many couples participating, the dancers will tire before having the opportunity to dance with every other couple. In this case, the band will simply stop playing and the dance will end.

Progressive dances are popular social dances as they are generally easy to learn and provide anyone who is willing to try with a chance to get up and dance. Some of the most commonly performed progressive dances include “The Walls of Limerick,” “The Siege of Ennis,” “The Haymaker’s Jig,” “The Waves of Tory,” and “The Siege of Carrick.” The terms figure dancing and ceili dancing both refer to the combined repertoire of progressive and non-progressive dances. However, progressive dances are commonly referred to as ceili dances, while non-progressive dances such as the two, three, four, six and eight-hand reels are commonly referred to as figure dances.

2.3 Dancing in Context

Irish dancing is done in a number of contextual situations from the beginner dance class to the world-class professional stage. The range of contexts contributes to the overall experience of Irish dancing, adding dynamics of social interaction, competition, and representation to the individual’s experience of the repertoire and dance form itself.

2.3.1 Dancing in Class

The beginner class is the point of departure in nearly every Irish dancer’s journey through the dancing world. There are usually between ten and twenty dancers in a dance class and in Irish dancing, the dancers are primarily female. In a beginner child class, there may be two or three male dancers, in a class of twenty. With three dance teachers

at the Mattierin School, the number of teachers instructing at one time ranges from one to three.

At Mattierin, there is a split studio, thus allowing two classes to take place simultaneously. The studio consists of two classrooms with a moveable divider that may be closed to create two dance spaces, or left open for one large space. This set-up is particularly useful for the novice adult class where it is primarily left open, except when one group, usually the most advanced dancers, are working on different repertoire than the rest of the class. For classes such as these, and for rehearsing the Routine, the split studio is beneficial.

A typical class begins with stretching. The dancers do a series of general body stretches on their own; this is usually a time for socializing with fellow classmates. Following this series of general stretches, the structured class begins. The teacher leads the class in a series of stretches that hone in on the different muscles from the waist down; this is due to the fact that Irish dancing movements are focused primarily in the lower body. Dancers are careful to adequately stretch and warm up all muscles before dancing in order to reduce the risk of injury. After stretches, the teacher leads the dancers in a sequence of dancing warm-ups. These high-energy war-up exercises serve the dual purpose of preparing the dancers physically to dance, as well as providing the opportunity for the teacher to evaluate the form of the dancers' basic steps and correct any problems outside of their choreographed dances.

A typical beginner or novice level class may include a review period where dancers perform dances that they have already learned. Beginning with the soft-shoe dances, the dancers line up against the back wall of the classroom. With the sounds of

Irish dance music coming from a portable stereo at the back corner of the dance studio, two students from one end of the line of dancers come forward to the centre of the room. As this pair dances, the next duo in line prepares to start their dance. This continues until all the dancers have had a turn to perform the given dance.

As the pairs dance, the teacher watches them, offering verbal feedback to correct various details of their dancing. Comments include: ‘Kick your bum!’, ‘Lift that leg higher!’, ‘Stretch that step!’, ‘Watch your right arm’, ‘Watch your timing!’, etc. These verbal clues speak to the pursuit of precision in Irish dancing. Many comments refer to developing a full range of motion of the legs from the full extension of the legs raised high in front of the body to the end of a jump where the dancer’s leg is bent with the foot at the buttocks. Other comments refer to the dancer’s upper body, ensuring that his or her torso and arms remain immobile.

After the dancers review the dances they know, the instructor begins to teach new steps to the class. These steps may be more difficult variations of dances they have already learned or new dances altogether. To teach the new material, the instructor performs a short demonstration of the eight-measure phrase, called a step. After the students have seen the entire step, the instructor breaks down the eight-measure phrase into smaller, more manageable segments. Once the dancers understand the individual gestures, the next challenge is to figure out how to make their bodies execute the step. As the dancers attempt the sequence of gestures, the instructor circulates among the students, offering tips on how they might improve. This entire process is done without music. Once the dancer is able to execute the step up to tempo, the next step is adding the element of music.

Usually every second or third week, the dance class also includes a figure dancing segment. In this portion of the class, the dancers work primarily in groups of 2, 3, 6, or 8 according to the number of dancers required for the particular dance that they are learning. These dances are learned in much the same way as the solo dances with the instructor demonstrating, the dancers attempting the steps, and finally the instructor critiquing the dance. Because figure dancing is based on the relationship between dancers in the group and how they move as a unit, the instructor usually enlists the help of students to demonstrate how the dancers move in relation to each other.

While each figure dance is unique, there are basic patterns or eight-measure steps that appear throughout the repertoire. Once a dancer has learned one or two figure dances, subsequent dances are learned more quickly because often a portion of the new dance will be the same as one that the dancer has already learned.

All of the solo dances and many of the figure dances are learned in preparation for competition. Because feiseanna are a primary venue for dancers to perform Irish dancing, competition becomes an important motivating factor in learning the repertoire of dances. Occasionally, class time is used to instruct dances that are not intended for competition purposes. Before the year-end ceili, the various dance classes at Mattierin all learn different progressive dances. The dance students learn these dances in preparation for the ceili event. While everyone present is invited to dance the progressive dances at the ceili, having a base of dancers who are familiar with the steps helps to facilitate the dances.

2.3.2 Dancing at a Feis

For many Irish dancers, dancing at feiseanna is their primary stage for performing Irish dancing. These competitions generally occur three or four times annually in the various Irish dancing regions. Dancers of all ages and levels of ability compete in these weekend-long competitions.

Dancers typically compete in several solo categories, called competitions, at a single feis. These competitions are determined according to which dance is to be performed. For the beginner and novice dancers, there are four solo soft shoe dance competitions: the reel, the light jig, the single jig, and for women, the slip jig. The hard shoe dances are learned after the basic soft shoe ones are mastered, and so the more advanced dancers also perform the hard shoe dances in competition. These dances include the treble jig, the hornpipe, the treble reel as well as traditional and contemporary set dances.

Before the actual competition begins, dancers line up at the side of the stage where they will be competing. There, a coordinator will check his or her list to make sure that all competitors are present. If a dancer is not present, usually another dancer from the same school will know if the dancer has decided not to compete because he/she felt unprepared, or if the individual is competing on another stage and will be late. If a dancer is scheduled to compete in two different competitions at the same time, it is the dancer's responsibility to notify the stage coordinators at both stages. If this is done with appropriate notice time, often as little as fifteen minutes, the stages can be coordinated so that the dancer can dance at one stage and then proceed directly to the other for the next competition. If the dancer does not notify the appropriate coordinators of the scheduling

conflict, or if the dancer simply does not show up, the competition proceeds with the remainder of the participants.

As a competition is about to start, the dancers line up on the side of the stage and go on stage in groups of ten dancers, positioning themselves in a line across the back of the stage. If there are more than ten dancers in a given competition, the remaining dancers will wait for the first ten to perform and exit the stage before going on stage themselves. For example, if there are thirteen dancers in a competition, the first ten will go on at once, and the last three will go on afterwards. The dancers are not split to make equal or near-equal groups in the different heats for two reasons. The first reason is for coordinating the music for two stages side by side. If both stages always try to have ten dancers on stage and ready to dance, the musician will play for the entire heat, stop, and then play for as long as it takes for the remaining dancers in the second heat to dance. This maximizes the musician's time. The second reason for always breaking dancers into groups of ten is for clarity. A judge and the audience know when the end of a competition is approaching if they see less than ten dancers on stage. This is particularly useful to dancers and parents of dancers who must monitor a stage to gauge when that dancer's competition will begin.

When in line, a dancers stand in an engaged dance position with his or her back and torso straight, arms held loosely at the sides, right leg crossed in front of the left, and both feet turned out. At this time, the adjudicator copies down the dancers' numbers that are displayed on cards that are pinned at waist level to the front of the dancer's costumes. When the adjudicator is ready, he/she looks up at the dancer and either rings a bell or makes a hand gesture to signify the beginning of the competition. The first two dancers

on stage right advance to the middle back of the stage. The musician begins playing, and after the eight-measure introduction, the dancers begin. Their dance lasts thirty-two bars. Solo competitions usually have two dancers compete at the same time, with the exception of the final dancer in a competition with an odd number of dancers. For open championship set dances, dancers compete one at a time.

While the first two competitors dance, the next two dancers in line are counting measures of the music, waiting for their turn to perform. When the first two dancers reach the end of their third phrase of music, at approximately measure twenty-four, the next two dancers walk to the middle back of the stage and assume the engaged dancing position that they had been holding while in the lineup. As the first two dancers finish dancing to their last phrase of music, the next two dancers prepare for their own dance. The first two dancers finish dancing, point their right foot forward and bow quickly to the adjudicator and then walk back to their original positions in the line of dancers across the back of the stage. As they walk back after their dance, they must be careful not to cross the path of the next two dancers who have already begun their dance. This continuous flow of music, with no rest period between dancers maximizes the time of the musician and shortens the length of the overall competition.

When the entire row of dancers has finished performing, the music ends and the dancers remain standing in their positions along the back of the stage. They stay there until the adjudicator has finished writing, at which point he/she rings a bell or motions with a hand gesture to continue the proceedings. The dancers all point their right feet forward and bow to the adjudicator, and then turn to the side of the stage where the

musician is sitting, and bow to the musician. After the two bows, the dancers file off the stage, and the next group of dancers walks on stage and prepare for their dance.

Because the majority of solo Irish step dances are choreographed by the teacher and/or dancer, dancers from different schools rarely have the same choreography. When dancers from different schools compete side by side, they must pay attention to where the other dancer is on stage. This can be challenging for dancers who are trying to concentrate on their own performance, let alone monitor someone else's. Occasionally the dancers do collide on stage. However, usually after participating in several feiseanna, dancers become accustomed to dancing beside someone with different choreography.

Often dancers are forced to adjust their choreography slightly in order to avoid colliding with the other dancer. This can be done by the dancer changing the direction of his or her path on the floor, or if this is impossible, dancing on the spot until the other dancer is out of the way. Because Irish dancing is competitive, dancers are constantly vying for the adjudicator's attention. Dancers often attempt to overtake the dancer beside whom they are competing, by moving towards the front of the stage and positioning their body between the other dancer and the adjudicator. Most choreographed solo Irish dances end with the dancer at the front of the stage. This is a time when dancers are often more relentless in their struggle for front and centre, the stage position most easily seen by the adjudicator.

This notion of out-dancing the other competitor to try to capture the adjudicator's attention is an accepted reality of competitive Irish dancing. For the most part, dancers are not offended when their fellow competitor tries to overtake them. In the most

extreme cases where a dancer seems more intent on jeopardizing the performance of his fellow dancer than concentrating on his own dancing, hard feelings may arise.

2.3.3 The Routine

In addition to performing at feiscanna, several dancers at Mattierin are also involved in the stage performance show called the Routine. This troupe of dancers, also called the Routine, is made up of approximately twenty of the best dancers, from every age group at the school including the youngest class of four and five-year-olds to the adult class. The Routine performs at many functions and venues throughout the year, thus providing opportunities for dancers to perform outside of the dance class and competitive settings. The selection of which dancers will participate in the Routine is based on the ability of the dancers, as well as who is able to commit to the often intense schedule of rehearsals and performances.

The teachers at the Mattierin School choreograph a fifteen-minute-long routine each year. This routine varies from performance to performance depending on the availability of the dancers as well as the length of the performance. If the function organizer wants a shorter performance, certain elements of the routine may be omitted. Conversely, if an organizer wants a performance longer than the choreographed fifteen-minute-long routine, new elements are added.

These additions include figure dancing such as two, three, four, six, and eight hand reels as well as solo performances. The students who perform the solo additions are chosen from among the roster of Mattierin students. Often a senior dancer is selected to

perform a hard shoe dance that he/she has learned for an upcoming feis. Other times, the younger, less experienced dancers will be invited to perform one of their solo dances. The less experienced dancers often perform these solo dances in pairs, with the duo dancing in tandem.

The dancer who is asked to fill in often depends on the nature of the performance. For the higher profile performances such as the Emerald Ball which takes place annually on St. Patrick's Day at one of the city's most well-appointed ballrooms, the most senior dancers are asked to perform. However, in the more casual performances such as at schools and nursing homes, the spirit of participation overrides the desire for professionalism, and the less experienced dancers are invited to take the stage. These more casual performances provide the less experienced dancers with an opportunity to perform, thus familiarizing the dance students with being on stage in an entertainment capacity instead of the usual competitive feis setting.

Creating the routine itself is an excellent team-building process. Dancers must come for extra rehearsals to learn, and then refine the sequence of dances that make up the routine. After several practices of one or two hours each, the dance students are able to perform the intricate figures and move together as a unit. The precise details that refine the performance of the routine are developed over time by the repeated execution of the moves. Most of these details are concerned with presenting a uniform group of dancers. Not unlike the performance of solo dances, dancers in the Routine must become aware of how their movement covers the floor space. In the choreographed routine, this becomes even more important as dancers not only have to be aware of where they are situated, but how their position relates to the other dancers, always keeping in mind the

limitations of the performance space. Because of the range of venues in which the group performs, each performance must be adjusted to maximize the use of the floor space.

The quest for unity requires a degree of trust among dancers as well as a heightened awareness of the one's self as well as the entire team. Dancers must be aware of spacing between bodies. In order to maintain the carriage of an Irish dancer with the head facing forward, dancers cannot spot for turns. Spotting is when a dancer turns his or her head in the direction that his or her body is turning, or in the direction that he/she will be moving. This technique is common to many styles of dance; however, in Irish step dancing there is no movement of the head.⁵ Instead the dancers must use their peripheral vision until they instinctively know where the other dancers are positioned.

While spacing and equal strides are important in a Routine performance, so is the individual dancer's body position. Dancers of varying heights and sizes work to parallel each other by having an erect upper body, high kicks, crossed legs and turned-out feet. These details, which present a challenge to nearly every solo Irish dancer, are extremely important when creating a uniform group of high quality dancers. If a dancer has a poor physical carriage, it is magnified when seen amidst a row of otherwise uniform dancers who have a good carriage.

The Mattierin Routine has an active performance season. For most of the dancers involved, Routine performances are their primary forum for performing Irish dance. While all the Routine dancers do compete in feiseanna throughout the year, the Routine performances allow them to focus on dancing as more of a social activity than a competitive sport. Perhaps the most obvious indication of the fact that such

performances are closer to the social rather than the competitive end of the spectrum of Irish dancing events is that the dancers often smile, whereas in competition, dancers rarely smile. The Routine teaches dancers how to perform in a group with a larger number of dancers than are required for most dances within the repertoire of Irish ceili dances. By providing an opportunity for dancers to perform in a non-competitive setting, the Routine compliments the feis setting, thus diversifying the experience of the dancers involved.

2.4 *Riverdance*

No examination of Irish dancing would be complete without at least a brief discussion of *Riverdance*. Catherine E. Foley writes about *Riverdance*:

Initiated as an intermission piece of seven minutes during the Eurovision Song Contest, 1994, it was extended into a ninety-eight-minute stage show due to critical acclaim on the night. (1999: 319)

Since *Riverdance*'s debut, the popularity of Irish dancing has surged, resulting in a massive growth in participants and fans. What had once been done by a small group of individuals, almost all of whom were Irish or Irish descendants was suddenly thrust onto the world stage. Other Irish dance shows have followed *Riverdance*'s lead, and over the past few years there have been over sixteen⁶ professional Irish dancing shows touring,

⁵ Micheal Flatley introduced elements such as moving the head and arms in his revolutionary choreography of *Riverdance*. These elements caused some traditionalists to question the authenticity of the large-scale show as true Irish dancing.

⁶ These include: *Riverdance*, *Lord of the Dance*, *Feet of Flames*, *Trinity Irish Dance Company*, *Rhythm of the Dance*, *Gael Force Dance*, *Spirit of the Dance*, *To Dance on the Moon*, *Needfire Celebration*, *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*, *Reel Irish Dance Company*, *Waves*, *Wild Irish Feet Dance Company*, *Celtic Feet*, *Celtic-fusion*, and *Dancing on Common Ground*.

some with several different casts performing concurrently in different locations around the world. The *Riverdance* show currently has three touring casts, the Lagan Company touring North America, the Shannon Company, formerly the Lee Company, performing on Broadway, and the Liffey Company touring Europe and Asia. The companies are named after the three primary rivers in Ireland.

For me, like many Irish dancers today, *Riverdance* was my initial introduction to Irish dancing. Although I was a fan of traditional Irish music, I knew nothing of the dance until I saw *Riverdance* on television. Now, when people ask me what kind of dance I do, and I reply ‘Irish,’ they generally have an accurate idea of the dance form. Occasionally someone will say: “Oh, you mean Highland dancing?” I will explain that Highland dancing is Scottish and that I do Irish dancing. “Have you seen *Riverdance*? That’s Irish dancing.” This reference is both meaningful and potent, painting a clear image of the dance form to individuals with no prior knowledge of Irish music, dance or culture.

For some dancers however, *Riverdance* figures much more prominently in their experience of Irish dancing than as a useful reference in conversation. For Ryan McCaffrey, a young Irish dancer from Calgary, Alberta, *Riverdance* has become a lifestyle and a career. Having studied at the Irwin School of Irish Dancing under the tutelage of Finnuala Irwin, ADCRG, Ryan excelled at the dance form from a young age, competing several times in the World Championships. Currently, he is a member of the Shannon Company, which performs on Broadway.

By performing with the troupe, Ryan has been able to turn his passion into a career, while connecting on a new level with others who share this passion.

When you are at school you cannot express everything about Irish dancing to your friends because they do not understand, but in *Riverdance* everyone had a similar time growing up which makes for a nice environment. Especially with the guys, because being a guy in Irish dancing isn't exactly the norm for an extra-curricular activity. In *Riverdance* all the guys went through the exact same thing, so we all relate to each other really well. (Personal Correspondence)

Competitive Irish dancing is dominated by female dancers. In a competition of dancers aged ten and under, there may be thirty dancers, three or four of whom are boys.

Between the ages of ten and eighteen, many boys stop dancing. At the 1999 Western Canadian Oireachtas held in Calgary, Alberta, the 'Girls Trophy Under 12 - Reel' competition had seventy-one participants while the 'Boy's Trophy Under 12 - Reel' competition had only six participants. The advanced dancers compete in the trophy competitions; this is the only time in most feiseanna that males and females do not compete together. In the World Championships, however, at no time do males and females compete against one another. By the time dancers reach the level of 'Open Champions 18 and Over,' many female dancers have stopped dancing so the ratio between male and female dancers is generally closer than in the younger age groups.

There are often between six and ten competitors in such competitions, one or two of whom are male dancers. More recently there have been even fewer male dancers in these categories. Merv Bell explained that "now any male dancer who is at that level is off doing a show, and if they are competing, it's because they're on break from touring."

Before *Riverdance*, the World Championships were the primary venue for bringing together male Irish dancers from around the world. Now, the large-scale shows provide a

new opportunity for male dancers to gain a sense of their collective identity, making their once ‘imagined’ community a real one.

For many Irish dancers who reach the professional level, large-scale shows such as *Riverdance* provide an opportunity to get to know other dancers against whom they would have competed in the World Championships. This environment allows dancers to work together in a non-competitive way. Ryan expresses a sort of ‘*carpe diem*’ or ‘*seize the day*’ sentiment towards this professional opportunity. “Everybody in the show just wants to have a good time and enjoy the *Riverdance* thing while it is still here.”

2.5 Experiencing the Dance

Because experiencing the dance itself is so closely tied to the physical sensations that occur when one performs this dance form, the experience of the dance itself is felt primarily by those who are participants. Spectators may appreciate the dance as a visual and aural experience, but the participant’s experience combines visual and aural elements with the sensations involved in making one’s body execute the steps.

In addition to learning how to physically execute the steps and gaining a sense of the repertoire of Irish dancing, the Irish dancer experiences the dance as it is performed in different venues. Nearly every dancer experiences dancing as a competitive sport through his or her participation in feiseanna and oireachtais. These competitions, which include both solo and figure dancing categories, provide the opportunity for dancers to meet other dancers from different schools and watch them dance. The adjudication process, carried out by certified adjudicators allows dancers to gain a sense of their

personal progress from feis to feis, and to evaluate their level of dancing as compared to dancers from other schools.

The Routine provides dancers with performance opportunities that are free from the competitive aspect of feiseanna and oireachtais. This venue is primarily for child dancers of various ages, with a few of the best adult dancers who also participate. These performances are particularly beneficial to the young dancers for building confidence, conquering fears of performing, and developing a stage presence. With an active performance calendar, Routine dancers have the opportunity to improve their performance skills throughout the year, constantly fixing difficult steps and giving more polished performances as the months pass.

Child dancers and adult dancers experience the dance in similar ways. The more advanced dancers experience a larger portion of the repertoire, as they are able to execute a larger range of steps. Usually the dancers who advance beyond the beginner or novice levels and move into the category of champion dancers have danced for several years. Nearly all open champion level dancers began as young children, when their bodies were more flexible and less fragile, and when they had time to practise and make Irish dancing a priority. For many dancers who began dancing later in life, their experience of the dance form and its repertoire is restricted by physical as well as temporal limitations.

Because adult dancers are usually limited in how far they can advance in solo Irish dancing, they often focus on figure dancing. Figure dancing concentrates less on the complexity of steps and more on creating a uniform group of dancers. Figure dances employ basic Irish dancing steps such as jumps, skips, cuts, and back-two-threes. Once a dancer has mastered these basic steps, he/she can work with a team to learn various figure

dancing from the basic four-hand reel to more challenging dances such as the cross-reel, a dance that involves sixteen participants.

Figure dancing allows for contact between dancers, both physical and visual. Much of figure dancing is done in pairs or lines, where dancers stand next to their partners and hold hands for the majority of steps. Holding hands is an important element of figure dancing and the fluid execution of taking and dropping hands, as well as the proper positioning of hands throughout the dance contributes greatly to the overall impression of the dance. Eye contact is also an element that is important in figure dancing but not in solo Irish dancing. To create uniform moves and parallel lines, dancers dancing across from each other must have a visual connection. This is also important for dancers dancing beside each other, although this connection is limited to peripheral vision.

Because of the connection that is built between dancers in figure dancing, it is often the most enjoyable form, especially for dancers who are unable to excel at the physically strenuous solo dancing. This is particularly visible in competition situations. While most solo dancers do not smile in competition, the same dancers smile throughout their figure dancing competitions.

In addition to its role in the adult dancer's experience of the dance, figure or ceili dancing is also part of the parents' experience. At ceilithe, parents have the opportunity to move beyond their usual role as spectators and physically take part in the dancing. Ceili dances, in which everyone present is invited to participate, offer an opportunity for people to partake in Irish dancing as a social activity free from the stress of competition. It allows everyone to become an Irish dancer for that period of time.

Finally, the teacher's experience of the dance builds on the lifetime of experience as he/she progressed from beginner to champion dancer. Because certified teachers with a TCRG designation are tested in both their knowledge as well as their actual ability in performing the dance form, most teachers grew up dancing and excelled at the dance form throughout their youth. In order to be able to be an effective teacher of Irish dancing, the individual must gain a more in-depth understanding of the dance and be able to explain and demonstrate it in a way that his or her students also understand and are able to perform the dance. Teachers also expand their experience of the dance through choreography. Teachers are expected to create choreography for their students' dances. This kind of creativity requires an intimate understanding of the different types of dance and the body of steps that may be combined to create the dances.

As teachers build on their experience as dancers, adjudicators build on their experiences as both dancers and teachers. Certified adjudicators with an ADCRG designation had to attain their TCRG before becoming an adjudicator. The role of adjudicator requires an even more in-depth understanding of the dance than the role of teacher. Adjudicators must understand the entire repertoire of gestures and remain aware of new trends in the dance. In order to be a fair judge of the dance, adjudicators must understand each step and its degree of difficulty, as well as how the sequencing of the steps contributes to the overall difficulty of the dance. This is particularly important because adjudicators of Irish dancing are required to judge competitions where, often, each dancer performs a different choreography. Michael Toal, ADCRG stated in an interview: "at this point [in my career] there isn't much I haven't seen (2000)." Still, this

in-depth knowledge of the dance has not suppressed his passion for the dance. He went on to say: “I still love Irish dancing, although I have more respect for it now (2000).”

For individuals like Ryan McCaffrey who reach the level of professional Irish dancers, *Riverdance* and other shows like it have greatly influenced their experience of Irish dancing, providing a new performance venue and career opportunity on the world stage. Catherine E. Foley writes that “[h]itherto, step dancers had few options, but to teach or retire; the big shows have supplied an alternative (1999: 319).”

2.6 Conclusion

Many different elements contribute to the experience of Irish dancing as a dance form. The distinguishing characteristics of the dance, including body positions and how steps are executed, govern the physical experience of the dance. The repertoire of solo and figure dancing also contribute to the experience of the dance, combining the preservation of steps through set dances with the evolution of the dance through creative choreography. With the fairly recent establishment of a canon of repertoire by the Irish Dancing Commission, Irish dancing is an invented tradition. The system of dance education, whereby Irish dancing students are able to learn the different elements of the dance form and advance through competition, ensures the maintenance of this tradition, thus strengthening the canon.

The context in which dancers perform this dance form also makes up part of their experience of it, creating a range of encounters from competing in feiseanna to performing in the school routine, and for some, performing at the professional level. The

context, repertoire, and distinguishing characteristics of the dance combine to make up the experience of Irish dancing as a dance form.

Chapter 3 – Irish Dance Music

3.1 Introduction

Irish music and dance are largely inseparable. Because so much of traditional Irish music is dance music, the bond between the music and dance is very strong. Some believe that one cannot listen to Irish music without feeling the dance. Since I began Irish dancing, I no longer hear Irish dance music the same way. Like many dancers, when I listen to Irish dance music, I find myself counting measures as if in preparation to begin the dance, and then proceeding to speak in my head a sequence of mnemonics that make up the steps that I would be doing as if I were actually dancing to the music.

In the dance class setting, learning the music is an important part of learning the dance. A dancer must comprehend the rhythm and meter of the various dances and be able to differentiate between them. Often a dancer will also learn the melodies of some of the more popular dance tunes after repeated hearings in class and in practice. For example, as a dancer learns a new dance, he/she memorizes and then internalizes patterns of moves that combine to make larger dance steps. This process begins with the dancer learning a set of mnemonics made up of a combination of names of moves and counting numbers. For example, one eight-measure phrase could be learned as: Turn 2-3-4-5, Jump 2-3-4-5, 1-2 Jump 2-3, Hop, Jump 2-3. Often a dancer can speak an entire dance before he/she is able to physically execute it. As a dancer repeats the mnemonics aloud or in his or her head, the rhythmic phrase will often begin to outline the contour of the melody of a tune, until eventually the dancer is singing the steps in his or her head.

This process extends beyond the individual dancer in the dance class setting. For example, if a dancer is performing in a class setting to recorded music and the piece finishes before he/she has completed the step, often the teacher or another class member will sing dance music until the dancer has finished. Sometimes dance step mnemonics or counting numbers are sung to the melody of an Irish dance tune. Other times, non-lexical syllables such as ‘deedle dee dum’ are used. This technique of singing dance tunes to nonsense syllables is called ‘poirt bheil’ which means lilting, or ‘portaireacht’ which means jigging (Breathnach, 1971: 63). Among members of the Irish dancing community, it is usually referred to as ‘lilting.’ (For a more in-depth discussion of ‘lilting’, see Angela Madden, 1999: 214-216.) Because music acts as a governing body for the dance, the dancer is always aware of the underlying rhythm and meter of the music, either heard or imagined.

3.2 Music as a Governing Body

Music is a key element in the structure of a dance. The vast majority of Irish dance music including reels, jigs, and hornpipes, employs a structure where melodic phrases are eight measures long. The rhythm and phrasing are the most important musical elements for a dancer. A dancer can dance to any melody that employs a consistent rhythmic structure (ie. hornpipe, jig, reel, etc.) and the eight-measure phrase structure. Because of this consistent division of phrases, a dancer is not forced to start dancing at the beginning of the piece, but rather, may start dancing at the beginning of

any musical phrase within the piece. As a result, a musician can play a number of dance tunes consecutively, and the dancer can start and stop dancing whenever he/she chooses.

Solo dances have two parts. The first part, which is generally eight measures long, is the 'lead-around.' After the lead-around is performed once through, the dancer begins the second portion of the dance entitled the 'sidestep.' The sidestep is performed in two sections, each one lasting eight measures of music. The first half of the sidestep begins with the right leg leading, followed by the same steps which are repeated with the left leg leading.

Set dances do not employ this structure of eight-measure phrases; often the second part of the dance is longer than the first. For the set dances, the first part of the dance is called the 'step' while the second part is called the 'set.' Because these dances are performed to predetermined or 'set' tunes, dancers do not have the option of beginning the dance at the beginning of any phrase in the music. When performing both contemporary and traditional set dances, a dancer must start at the beginning of the tune.

In addition to determining the structure of the dance by the number of measures in the musical phrase, the rhythm and meter of Irish dance music also governs the type of dance that will be done. As a result, the repertoire of Irish dance music can be divided into the basic categories of reels, jigs, and hornpipes. The following five musical examples give the first phrase of well-known Irish dance tunes. While these tunes may be found in a number of published sources and on different recordings, I found the written transcripts in a tune book entitled Cobblestone Tune Book. This collection of Irish dance tunes was loaned to me by one of the parents at the Mattierin School, who had

been given the book by a music teacher in Ireland. There is no publishing information printed anywhere throughout the collection.

The reel (Example 1) originated in Scotland in the mid-eighteenth century. The music is in 4/4 time and is danced at a relatively fast tempo. In the reel rhythm, the first beat of the measure is emphasized, and it is counted: *ONE-two-three-four*. The reel may be performed in soft or hard shoes. The soft shoe reel is usually called ‘reel,’ while the hard shoe version of the dance is called the ‘treble reel.’

Musical Example 1: “Red-Haired Boy” (Reel)

The musical notation for "Red-Haired Boy" (Reel) is presented in two staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#), indicating G major. The time signature is 4/4. The melody is written in a treble clef. The first staff contains four measures of music, and the second staff contains five measures. The notes are as follows: Staff 1: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. Staff 2: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. Chords are indicated by letters above and below the staves: A, D, A, G above the first staff; A, D, A, E, A below the second staff.

Another main type of Irish dance music is the jig. This is the oldest known form of Irish dance music, dating at least as far back as the mid-seventeenth century. There are three types of jig music. The light jig (Example 2), also called the double jig or the common jig, is performed in soft shoes while the treble jig is performed in hard shoes. Both of these dances employ the same jig music, which is in 6/8 time with a triple division of the beat. It is counted: *ONE-two-three four-five-six*.

Musical Example 2: “Rakes of Kildare” (Light Jig)

The musical notation for "Rakes of Kildare" is presented in two staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes. Chords are indicated above the notes: Amin, C, G, Emin, G, Amin on the first staff, and C, G, Emin, Amin on the second staff.

The single jig (Example 3) is played in 6/8 or occasionally 12/8 time, and is counted: *ONE-two-three four-five-six*. This dance is performed in soft shoes. The single jig differs from other jig music by its grouping of notes. While light jig music generally follows a pattern of two groups of three eighth notes each, the rhythmic grouping in the single jig rhythm follow the pattern of a quarter note followed by an eighth note. Breathnach writes that “[t]he single jig is not unlike the double, but is modified to suit the crotchet-quaver arrangement of the music (1971: 44).”

Musical Example 3: “Road to Lisdoonvarna” (Single Jig)

The musical notation for "Road to Lisdoonvarna" is presented in two staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes. Chords are indicated above the notes: Emin, D, B min on the first staff, and Emin, A, B min, Emin on the second staff.

The third type of jig is the slip jig (Example 4), also called the hop jig, which is in 9/8 time and is counted: *ONE-two-three four-five-six seven-eight-nine*. The slip jig is

danced in soft shoes and is the most graceful dance in the repertoire of Irish step dancing. This is the only dance in the repertoire of Irish step dancing that is limited by gender. Only women perform this dance in competition, while both men and women perform the rest of the dances in competition. In past decades, boys learned this dance even if they did not perform it in competition. Today, however, it is uncommon for males to learn the dance at all.

Musical Example 4: “Barney Brallaghan” (Slip Jig)

The image shows the musical notation for the slip jig "Barney Brallaghan". It consists of two staves of music in treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 9/8. The melody is written in a single line across both staves. Above the first staff, the letter 'D' is placed above the first measure, and 'G' is placed above the eighth measure. Above the second staff, 'D' is placed above the first measure, 'G' is placed above the fifth measure, and 'A' is placed above the eighth measure. The melody features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with a final double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the second staff.

The hornpipe (Example 5) is a hard shoe dance that has a musical structure similar to a reel. The hornpipe is played more slowly, accenting the first and third beats. By playing the music, which is in 4/4 time, at this more deliberate tempo, the beats are divided into groups of threes and the dance is counted: *ONE-and-a two-and-a three-and-a four-and-a*. Breathnach writes that “[t]he hornpipe is of English origin, and it assumed its present form around 1760, when it changed over from triple time (3/2) to common time (1971: 61).” The hornpipe was originally danced on the stage between the acts of plays.

Musical Example 5: “Rights of Man” (Hornpipe)

The musical notation for "Rights of Man" (Hornpipe) is presented on two staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is written in treble clef and consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, often grouped in triplets. Chords are indicated above the staff: Emin, B7, Emin, Amin, B7, Emin. The piece ends with a double bar line.

The different rhythms and meters of Irish dance tunes determine the choice of moves, and their arrangement to form the larger steps of the dance. These meters and rhythms are constant, allowing the dancer to perform a dance to any number of melodies that are in that particular dance form such as the reel, hornpipe, and light, single, and slip jigs. In class and competition, the dancer is expected to be able to perform their dance to any tune that is played.

There are some restrictions that arise due to the speed at which a tune is played. For example, a beginner dancer may perform his or her reel at a quicker tempo than an experienced dancer because the beginner’s moves are much simpler and can be executed at the faster tempo. The more experienced dancer usually dances at a slower tempo in order to incorporate more difficult and elaborate moves into the same number of measures of music. Performing a dance at a slower tempo requires more stamina as the dancer takes a longer time to complete the dance, than if it were performed at a quicker tempo. Appendix 1 shows a chart of the standard repertoire of Irish dancing including the thirty set dances with the range of speeds at which they may be performed as determined by the Irish Dancing Commission. Included also are typical speeds at which they are played.

While the concept of ‘canon’ is also present in Irish dance music, it is not as rigid as in the physical dance itself. The form of the music, including meter, tempo, and phrase-structure are intimately linked to the dance canon. The tunes however, excluding the thirty prescribed ‘set dance’ tunes, are not. The individual musicians are given much freedom in their selection of which tunes to play for dance competitions. There is a repertoire of standard tunes that most musicians know and can play. These are not regulated by the Irish Dancing Commission but rather have been established through the sharing of tunes between musicians. Anthony McCann asserts that “grass-roots Irish traditional music transmission rests upon an as-yet-unarticulated system of gift or sharing (2001: 89).” It is this principal that has shaped the standard repertoire of dance tunes employed in competitive Irish dancing.

3.3 Instruments

The primary musical instruments in Irish dancing music are the piano accordion and the fiddle. While the harp, penny whistle, Irish flute and uilleann pipes⁷ figure prominently in the vast repertoire of Irish traditional music, the accordion and fiddle dominate the Irish dancing world. At feiseanna, the primary instrument used to accompany dancers in competition is the piano accordion. The piano accordion is a versatile solo instrument because it combines the functions of melody and rhythmic chords within a single instrument.

⁷ “Bellows-blown bagpipe with chanter, three drones and keyed melody pipes capable of providing harmony simultaneously with the melody.” (Wilbert Garvin in Vallely, 1999: 410)

Occasionally a fiddler will play at a feis, accompanied by either piano or guitar. The accompanying chordal instrument generally emphasizes the beat, adding depth to the sound of the fiddle's melody. This becomes particularly important in the feis setting when a competition room is full of people and is noisy, thus making it difficult for the dancers to hear only the melody. The accompanying instrument alleviates some of this strain, helping dancers feel the beat and count the strong first beats of each measure of music.

There are several recordings of music intended specifically for accompanying Irish dancing.⁸ While there are many recordings of Irish dance music intended for the casual listener, these particular recordings appeal almost exclusively to the Irish dancing market. Most such CDs and tapes are not available from local music stores. They are however, sold by vendors at feiseanna, and in recent years, over the Internet. Because most feiseanna use accordion players to play for competitions, most of these recordings feature this instrument. There are some recordings that focus on the violin as the primary melodic instrument; one example is Two Left Feet's 1999 recording entitled Music for Irish Dancing, Vol. 1, Solos. These recordings usually include a full band, adding the sounds of guitar, bass, piano, and bodhran to the fiddle's melody. Some tracks feature the piano accordion as the primary melodic instrument.

3.4 Irish Dance Music, Both Live and Recorded

In Irish dancing both recorded and live music are used. The medium that is chosen depends mostly on the setting. In the classroom setting, the majority of the music

⁸ See discography.

heard is recorded. In feiseanna, however, recorded accompaniment is prohibited by An Coimisiún. Consequently, in preparation for an upcoming feis, a teacher who usually uses recorded accompaniment in the studio will often invite a musician to play for his or her class. This gives students an opportunity to practise dancing to live musical accompaniment. The Mattierin School is very fortunate in that the students gain much experience dancing to live music. As an accomplished feis musician, Merv Bell often plays his accordion in the dance class. This allows students to gain experience in dancing to live musical accompaniment, something that will be required of them in feis and performance situations.

Even with the available live music at the Mattierin School, recorded accompaniment is still used for several reasons. It exposes students to different instrumental realizations, expands their knowledge of the repertoire of dance tunes, and familiarizes them with different styles of playing. By hearing a variety of musical interpretations of the various types of dance music (ie. jig, reel, hornpipe, etc.), the dancer becomes more aware of the structure of the music. If a dancer only ever listens to one musician's interpretation of pieces, he/she may become accustomed to that musician's style, and become dependent on musical hints from that style or repertoire to know when to dance and what moves to do.

Many Irish dancing schools have a performance troupe made up of students from the school. For their choreographed routines, many schools create an accompaniment tape comprised of segments of various recorded pieces. By selecting segments of pieces, the troupe is able to showcase several different types of dances such as jigs, hornpipes, reels, and set dances, rather than just one or two. This diversity of program would be

extremely difficult to achieve if after every segment, the performance had to be momentarily paused to cue the recording for the next dance.

Performances by the Mattierin School's Routine are usually done to live accompaniment. There have been some instances where the troupe was scheduled to perform at a time when Merv Bell was out of town or unable to play, and at those few occasions, taped accompaniment has been used. The preference however, is to perform to live music. All Routine performances that feature live music are led by Merv playing the accordion.

When they are available, Barry and Shelley Mottershead, both adult dancers themselves and parents of child dancers, play bodhran. The drum's distinctive sound, which combines complex rhythmic patterns with variations in pitch, has become an important feature of present-day performances of Irish dance music. Sometimes only Shelley will play. However, if both Barry and Shelley are present, they play together, creating a more elaborate accompaniment with the interplay of the two drums. For high profile performances, other members of Merv's band "The Celtics" join the performance troupe, adding the sounds of fiddle, guitar and drums to the accordion and bodhran.

There are several advantages to using live musical accompaniment, the most important being that a live musician can adjust to the individual performance situation. The performance then becomes a dialogue between musician and dancer, instead of a dancer trying to fit his or her steps into a pre-determined interpretation of the music. If a dancer forgets his or her steps, stumbles or even falls, a live musician can either adjust the tempo to mask the fumble and help the dancer get back in time with the music, or move on to the next piece if the dancer is unable to continue.

Using live musical accompaniment as opposed to recorded accompaniment for performance purposes is also beneficial for the musician involved. It is much easier for a musician to choose a comfortable dancing tempo when there is a dancer present than when he/she is recording in front of a microphone. Often without the dancer, a musician will choose a tempo that works well for an instrumental piece but is slightly too quick for a dancer to perform. By having a dancer present, it is easier for the musician to gauge the tempo, establishing one that is comfortable for the dancer. If a musician is an inexperienced performer, he/she may cause problems for the dancer by playing too slow or too fast. For the experienced musician however, accompanying dancers live is more a comfortable and gratifying experience. “The ideal dance player is one who understands dancing, who can enter into the spirit of the dances, and who can communicate that spirit to those on the floor (MacFionnlaioic, 1992: 2).”

Performing to live music allows for a spontaneity that is nearly impossible in a performance to pre-recorded music. It is much easier to add and omit pieces if the program length needs to be adjusted. Also, the choice and order of pieces can easily be changed if certain dancers are present and others are not, or to adapt to the audience’s response in the moment. Even in a program that does not require any changes, having live musical accompaniment allows for smooth transitions between segments of the routine that use different types of Irish dance music. In addition to offering flexibility, the live musician adds another element to the overall performance. Audiences respond well to live musicians and appreciate a range of talent on stage that is present when both musicians and dancers perform together.

Another feature of the Mattierin School's Routine that often sets it apart from the routines of other dance schools is the incorporation of child dancers playing instruments. In the Routine, there are a few young dancers who are accomplished musicians. At one point in the performance, the band stops playing and the three Michniewski sisters, Clare and Siobhan on fiddle and Roisin on penny whistle, emerge from among the other dancers and perform. More recently other child dancers have joined the sisters, adding another penny whistle played by Lora Gale Slobodian, and bodhran played by Jessica Bell, to the miniature band of dancing musicians, or rather, musician dancers.

While practising and performing to live musical accompaniment is generally preferred, logistically, this is an impossibility for most dancing schools. Recordings of musical accompaniment expose dancers to the different styles of high quality and well-respected musicians in the circuit. Such recordings alleviate the cost of hiring a musician to attend weekly dance classes, and are a valuable teaching resource in the studio. Teachers use these recordings throughout the teaching process from the initial explanation of the meter and the rhythm, to the dancer's performance of the complete dance to the music. They also provide students with music to which they can practise dancing outside of the dance class setting.

3.5 Experiencing the Music

Because of the intimate bond between Irish dancing and the music that accompanies it, Irish dance music is a significant element in the experience of Irish dancing. For many participants at every level of the dance, their initial introduction to

the dance was through the music. It was only after developing a strong affinity for the music that they began dancing. For teacher and adjudicators, most of whom grew up listening to Irish music around the house both on recordings and at live sessions and gatherings, the music is an important part of their overall experience of the Irish culture.

For child dancers, learning to play Irish music and learning Irish dancing often go hand in hand. On a family trip to Ireland one summer, the Michniewski sisters, who dance with the Mattieirin School, attended the Willie Clancy Summer School.

The Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy is Ireland's largest traditional music summer school, held annually since 1973 in memory of the piper Willie Clancy. During the week, nearly a thousand students from every part of the world attend daily classes taught by experts in Irish music and dance. In addition, a full program of lectures, recitals, dances (céilithe) and exhibitions are run by the summer school.

(Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy, website 2000)

For the Michniewski sisters, who are trained in classical violin and who are also performers of Irish dancing, this workshop combined their two passions. In an interview, Lora Gale Slobodian, a teenaged dancer at the Mattierin School, said that she began listening to Irish music long before she started dancing, but as soon as she started dancing, she wanted to learn how to play the music as well. Smiling, she added, that after competing in her first feis, she immediately bought a penny whistle and started trying to figure out how to play it.

Within the Irish dancing community, dancers who also play Irish music are rarely in search of a performance venue. For me, being a musician who performs Irish music, I have found new and enthusiastic audiences among the Irish dancing community as well as the local Irish community, which I accessed through my ties to the Mattierin School of

Irish Dancing. At numerous ceilithe and performances, I have been invited to join the musicians on stage to sing a few numbers. Dancer musicians, especially children, who are able to perform both music and dance, are highly valued as members of the transnational Irish community. Not only do they act as ambassadors for Irish culture in North American communities, they also act as reassurance to the older members of the community that the cultural traditions of their homeland will continue to thrive through the younger generation's participation.

At the 1999 Penk-O'Donnell feis in Fort MacMurray, Alberta, this sentiment was formalized. In the middle of the dance competitions of the feis weekend, there was a short musical competition where dancers and viewers were invited to perform a musical number and compete for fun. This short break in the dance competition allowed musicians, especially child dancers who played instruments or who sang, to showcase their talents while at the same time providing a welcome break from the stress of the competition. By participating in this musical competition, dancers were encouraged to perform as musicians and not only as dancers, as in the rest of the weekend's activities. Historically, feiseanna were not only dancing competition but rather festivals of Irish culture with a variety of competitions including dance, music, and story-telling. Today, however, 'feiseanna' has come to imply strictly dancing competitions. By incorporating this musical competition into the feis weekend, organizers from the Penk-O'Donnell School of Irish Dancing showed their support for the development of well-rounded child dancers who pursue both the dance and the music.

For many adult dancers, the music was the first thing that attracted them to Irish dancing. Since the recent surge in popularity of Irish dance, music and culture, more

people have sought to experience the music in new meaningful ways. For individuals with musical ability, especially those with a level of proficiency on an instrument, this has meant expanding one's repertoire to include traditional Irish music. This option of learning to play the music, however, is not an easy undertaking, even for musicians who are skilled performers of other repertoires. It is difficult to find a teacher because there are few formal institutions such as conservatories or music academies⁹ dedicated to the teaching and learning of traditional music. There are private teachers; however, these individuals are often primarily performers who teach on the side. In the absence of formal structures such as conservatories in which one may learn and participate in traditional Irish music making, it becomes extremely difficult for those with a keen interest to learn to perform this music.

Even if a musician does succeed in learning some of the repertoire of traditional Irish music, there are still very few forums in which he/she may perform this music. The 'session' is one of the primary forums to perform this music with other musicians. But even with the informal 'come as you are' quality of the gathering, there is no guarantee that a new musician will gain entry into the inner circle of performers. There is a certain standard that must be met for individuals to be truly welcomed into the circle of participants and 'session' players have a way of gently excluding players whose styles do not fit with the musical goals and methods of the key participants. Stokes writes that at musical sessions in Ireland "musicians have a way of freezing out players who are too obtrusive, or confus[e] the playing (1994: 109)."

⁹ In Ireland, there are summer programs such as the Willie Clancy Summer School and the Blas International Summer School for Irish Music and Dance at the Irish World Music Centre, U. of Limerick.

Because of the difficulty in both learning and performing Irish music, it is very difficult for an individual to become an insider to the traditional music-making community. Dance however, presents a new point of entry for many interested individuals. With its formal structure of repertoire and steps, its hierarchical organization of students, teachers and adjudicators, and its institutions, Irish dancing becomes a door to a new level of participation in Irish music and culture. Its progressive structure allows individuals of any age to start from scratch and progress as a dancer, learning the repertoire and gaining opportunities to perform the repertoire in feis competitions and for some, in other performance settings. For many adult Irish dancers at the Mattierin School, interest in the music led to an interest in the dance, and in learning how to perform the dance. One adult dancer who attends the adult dance class with his wife, and whose children also study Irish dancing at the Mattierin School, remarked that “the dancing seemed like a natural progression. I had always loved the music and wanted to learn how to dance. Plus, so much of Irish music is dance music.” Nellie Wong, another member of the adult class explained how the dance has led to a deeper appreciation of the music, saying that “I love the music, but I never really understood it until I danced it.”

Most individuals who become Irish dancing teachers and adjudicators come from a family lineage of dancers, teachers, and musicians. As members of such families, these individuals were introduced to the music and dance very early in their lives. Michael Toal, ADCRG explains that there was always live and recorded Irish music playing in his parents’ home in Belfast, and that he and his wife have continued to play Irish music in their family’s home in Canada. Having grown up listening to Irish music and learning

steps around the house as a young child, Michael's daughter Tara has also been immersed in Irish music and dance and is an accomplished dancer herself.

Like Michael Toal, Merv Bell's childhood was steeped in Irish music and dance. When his parents came to Canada from Ireland, they also played live and recorded Irish music in the home. As in many diaspora communities, Irish immigrants who moved to North America gained a heightened awareness of their Irish heritage, clinging to cultural artifacts such as music and dance, and as Merv explains: "becoming more Irish than when they left." Merv and his wife Patti, who first met when they were both competitors at a feis, have continued their involvement in Irish music and dance. In addition to founding the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing and Merv's career as feis musician, their daughters Jessica and Rebecca are both talented dancers, competing at the North American level.

3.6 Conclusion

Music is one of the primary elements of the experience of Irish dancing. For the dancer, it acts as a blueprint or code, governing different elements of the dance. Musical elements including rhythm, meter, and in the case of set dances, even the tunes dictate the steps that will be performed. The music is experienced whenever Irish dancing is performed, whether it is played live by musicians present, on recordings, or even in the heads of dancers who have internalized it.

For musicians who do attain the level of musicianship required to perform traditional Irish music, their experience is often much less regimented than the experience

of learning Irish dancing through a dancing school. Musicians do not compete in the formalized way that dancers do, and as a result are not tied to the strict rules and regulations that govern competitive dancing. For the recreational musician, there is a greater freedom in making music for the purpose of enjoyment than there is for the dancer in the competitive circuit. In this way, music making may be considered a folk art whereas competitive Irish dancing is for the most part too structured for this classification.

For many, music planted the initial seed of interest in Irish dancing. For the majority of participants who came from a family that was already involved in Irish music and dancing, their childhood was enveloped by Irish music. By hearing it played in the home during childhood, they became familiar with the repertoire and musical forms. For many whose involvement in Irish dancing came later in life, music was also their first introduction to the dance. The Irish dancing community has a large membership of individuals who started as Irish music enthusiasts and decided to pursue this passion by becoming involved in the dance. Beyond providing the initial entry into the world of Irish dancing, for many, music continues to fuel their thirst to know more about Irish dancing and culture.

Chapter 4- Irish Dancing as a Cultural Activity

4.1 Introduction

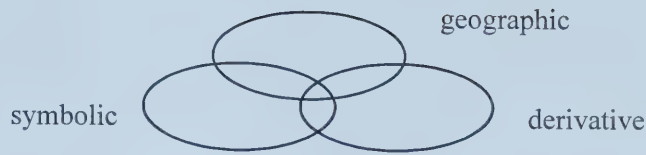
Identity is grounded in multiple ways of knowing with affective and direct experiential knowledge often being paramount. The crucial link between identity formation and arts like music lies in the specific semiotic character of these activities which make them particularly affective and direct ways of knowing. (Turino, 1999: 221)

Turino's concept recognizes the importance of symbolism or semiotic character in linking art with identity. Such is the case for participants of Irish dancing. The majority of participants in Irish dancing do come from an Irish background, whether they are from Ireland themselves or their link to Ireland goes back several generations. For these individuals, Irish dancing has become a way of expressing their cultural heritage and ensuring that their family maintains a sense of their own Irish identity, either by becoming dancers themselves or enrolling their children in Irish dancing classes.

In order to examine the role of symbolism in Irish dancing, I have chosen to employ a model of cultural specificity developed by Andriy Nahachewsky, a scholar of folklore and dance. Nahachewsky has used this model in his own research to illustrate how: "the terms 'ethnic' and 'Canadian/American' are not alternative identities, but clearly compatible and often simultaneous (2000)." This model is one way to focus on what elements of the dance are symbolically Irish, which I argue are the elements that contribute the most to the experience of Irish dancing as a cultural activity.

4.2 What makes something culturally-specific?: Understanding the Model

Figure 3: The Nahachewsky Model



Andriy Nahachewsky's model suggests three main categories of cultural affiliation: geographic, derivative and symbolic. The three interlocking circles in the diagram represent these three categories of what makes ethnic dance 'ethnic' or rather 'culturally-specific.' This diagram is particularly useful because of the flexibility that it offers in showing how different elements of the dance are not limited to a single category but can fit into one, two, or three different categories simultaneously.

The first category of the model is "geographic." This refers to something that is physically in the location in question. For example, any dancing that is done in Ireland would be considered Irish according to this criterion. This category includes all forms of dance, from the dancing that takes place in night clubs across the country to performances of classical ballet and traditional folk dancing. This portion of the model is concerned only with the geographic location of the dance.

The second category is "derivative." This category refers to anything that came from the homeland in question. Included in this category are material objects, people, as well as traditions and cultural artifacts such as music, dance and visual arts.

The third category of the model is "symbolic." This category refers to any element of dance that holds some symbolic value. Some dance steps, though not all carry symbolic weight. Other details such as costumes, studio decor, and performance events may also hold symbolic value and appear in this portion of the model.

Items that are associated with a geographic area because they came from that area (by derivation) do not have to be recognizably so. For example, a generic t-shirt with no writing or pattern printed on it that was purchased on vacation in Ireland would be Irish by derivation. The wearer would know this, but it would not necessarily be obvious to other people who saw the garment. Contrarily, a t-shirt with “Kiss me, I’m Irish” or images of Celtic knots and shamrocks that was also purchased on vacation in Ireland, would create an obvious association with Ireland for anyone who saw the t-shirt, even if they did not know that the wearer had gone on a trip there. This second t-shirt would be Irish by derivation because it was purchased in Ireland, as well as symbolically Irish because it creates a visual link between itself and geographic Ireland. Of course, if this second t-shirt were worn in geographic Ireland, it would fit into all three categories.

It is important to realize that not every element in Irish dancing carries symbolic weight. For example, the Mattierin studio is located in two classrooms of a local elementary school. The location of the studio does not contribute to or take away from the Irishness of what goes on inside the studio. Also, some of the posters on the wall of the studio have nothing to do with Irish dancing, but rather, carry messages of believing in one’s self and striving to achieve one’s goals. These factual realities such as the location of the studio and generic inspirational messages on the studio walls are part of the overall Mattierin experience, although they do not figure in the ethno-cultural portion of this overall experience. This portion of my study is concerned only with elements that contribute to the Irish cultural aspects of the experience of Irish dancing.

4.3 Applying the Model

When examining the experience of Irish dancing in general, geographic Ireland is largely insignificant. For Irish dancers living in Ireland, the fact that they live in Ireland is for many, simply part of their geographic situation, the reality of where they live. For many Irish dancers living outside of Ireland, geographic Ireland rarely enters into their experience. Instead what is important in their experience of Irish dancing as a cultural activity, is Irishness as a transnational entity, not limited by borders but realized through symbols.

For participants of Irish dancing beyond geographic Ireland, trips to visit or compete in Ireland may contribute to their overall experience of Irish dance and culture. Still, what causes these trips to figure as important events in an individual's life has as much to do with the trips' symbolic value as it does with the actual geographic location of the trip. For me personally, part of the thrill of travelling around Ireland was visiting different locations that I had sung about in folk songs, or whose names were in the title of dances that I had danced such as "The Walls of Limerick" and "The Siege of Ennis."

Every dancer in the Mattierin community comes into contact with various elements that are Irish by derivation. From the dance steps, body positions and gestures in the dance to the vast repertoire of Irish dance music, participants are in constant contact with things from Ireland. Not only are the music and dance Irish by derivation, so are many of the people involved in this Irish dancing community. The teachers at the Mattierin School all come from families with an Irish heritage; although they themselves

were not born in Ireland, their families all came from Ireland. Also, several parents and adult dancers are from Ireland.

These factual realities of who or what actually came from Ireland are not as important to an individual's experience of Irish dancing as are elements that are symbolically Irish. Because symbolism is such a strong marker of ethnic identity, it figures most prominently in the experience of the participants involved. Herbert J. Gans defines symbolic ethnicity as "a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior (1996: 146)." He goes on to explain that cultural symbols "must be visible and clear in meaning to large numbers of third generation ethnics, and they must be easily expressed and felt, without requiring undue interference in other aspects of life (1996: 146)." Irish dancing contains many symbols that emphasize its Irishness. These symbols serve the dual function of emphasizing the Irishness of the activity, thus creating a communal identity for participants in the activity, as well as marking the activity as different from non-Irish activities.

Many elements that make up the Western Canadian Irish dancing community are both symbolically Irish as well as Irish by derivation. Much of the music fits into both categories. Some of the dance tunes were composed in Ireland, but also sound 'Irish,'¹⁰ thus linking the tunes symbolically to Ireland. Other tunes that were not composed in

¹⁰ This qualification of what sounds 'Irish' is difficult to quantify as it varies from listener to listener. Trademark characteristics that figure in Irish dance music are eight-measure phrases, a quick tempo, highly articulated rhythms in whichever form the dance is (reel, jig, hornpipe, etc.), and often a modal quality to the melody. The featured instruments include accordion, fiddle, bodhran, as well as flute, harp, and uilleann pipes.

Ireland may still be considered Irish music because they sound 'Irish.' Their entry into the repertoire is based on a symbolic association with Ireland, but may also be considered partially Irish by derivation, because the tune's structure is that of traditional Irish dance music.

Events such as feiseanna, and oireachtais also fit into both categories of symbolic and derivative. These competitions were first done in Ireland but continue in North America to be lived experiences of Irish culture at work. Ceilithe are symbolically Irish. The first Irish ceili was hosted by a group of Irish immigrants in London in November, 1897. Scottish ceilithe had taken place earlier, and it was after these Scottish parties that Irish immigrants modelled their own gatherings (Cullinane, 1998: 24). Although such events were originally Scottish, they have come to represent Irishness to those who attend them. For North Americans especially, ceilithe are strong symbols of Irish culture because they include elements such as ceili dancing and listening to Irish music, which are themselves, markers of Irish ethnicity.

Visual elements play an important role in symbolic associations with ethnicity. Costumes are an example of vivid imagery that strengthens the presence of Irish culture and ethnicity in Irish dancing. Solo costumes are often custom-made and many are one-of-a-kind garments. These dresses are often decorated with elaborate patterns, many of which have strong ties to Irish culture.

The Book of Kells continues to inspire many Celtic and zoomorphic motifs. Designs are often much freer than the drawings in the manuscript, however, some using loose loops instead of interlace. Hounds, snakes, Irish harps, the 'Tara' brooch, the Claddagh ring, torc neck pieces, Celtic monograms, family, county, city and provincial coats of arms and round towers are also among the

motifs used. (Robb, 1998: 29)

Images of Christianity such as the chalice and Celtic¹¹ crosses also reference Irish culture and its strong associations with the Catholic Church. The range of motifs on Irish dancing costumes imply a rich culture from which the images are taken, as well as a dedication on the part of the makers, buyers, and wearers of these costumes to hold on to Ireland as a point of cultural reference. These images are both symbolically Irish and Irish by derivation.

Decor is another site for Irish symbolism. At the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing, posters of dancing shoes, professional dancers, and champion dancers at the World Championships decorate every wall of the studio. Among these posters and photographs of the Mattierin Routine, there are images of rural Ireland and tourist sites posted on the walls. There are also maps of regions, one of which references Irish family names and where they originated. One wall features artwork done by child dancers at Mattierin. Proudly displayed are drawings of Irish dancing shoes, Celtic knots, professional dancers, and the dancers themselves in their costumes. The pictorial content of these images are overt references to Ireland, creating a link between geographic Ireland and the dance studio, which is symbolically Irish.

Decor is also used to reference Irish culture at feiseanna, oireachtais, and ceilithe. At feiseanna, flags are usually displayed in the hall where competitions take place. At feiseanna that I have attended across the province of Alberta, typically the flags of

¹¹ The term 'Celtic' is used when describing visual art, usually referring to design patterns as seen in carvings from ancient Ireland, and in the Book of Kells. The term is not generally used by the Irish dancing community when referring to music. Irish dance music is called 'traditional' or 'Irish.' If the term 'Celtic' is used in discussing music, it is usually in reference to a sort of new-age, global market, mood music labeled 'Celtic' by the recording industry. This treatment of 'Celtic music' parallels Vallely's definition. (in Vallely, 1999: 64-65)

Canada, Alberta, and Ireland are shown. As well, when available, the flag of the host organization of the feis is displayed. The feis and oireachtas programs, which contain information about the various competitions as well as rules and regulations of the feis, often feature elaborate Celtic designs and patterns on the front cover. All of these elements add to the overall 'Irishness' of the event within the context of the non-Irish North American milieu.

At many feiseanna, there is a ceili on the Saturday night of the weekend-long competition. This addition to the weekend's program is an important element in the cultural nature of the weekend. It provides an opportunity for dancers and their families and friends to participate in an event that celebrates Irish culture free from the competitive setting that dominates the rest of the weekend. This social evening allows participants to appreciate Irish music and dance without the concentration and anxiety over details such as the precision and accuracy of steps that is present when performing in competition.

At the Edmonton feis, hosted by the Irish Sport and Social Society, there is always a ceili. This party takes place on Saturday night and, for many, is the highlight of the weekend. The Celtics, a local band that plays a variety of music from old time rock 'n' roll to traditional Irish music, host the evening. The band is made up of Bill Morris on guitar and vocals, Mathew Monaghan on violin, Rob Morton on drums and Merv Bell on accordion, keyboard, and guitar. By including a range of music styles, the Celtics strive for a program that appeals to a wide range of tastes thus allowing everyone to get up and dance at some point during the evening.

One of the highlights of the ceili evening is the figure dancing portion. The Walls of Limerick and the Siege of Ennis are two progressive dances that are performed at nearly every ceili, however, sometimes the Haymaker's Jig, the Siege of Carrick, and the Waves of Tory are also performed. Everyone present is invited to join in these dances and there are participants of all ages from young children to senior citizens. The figure dancing begins with a brief explanation of the steps of the dance. After the explanation, the participants line up and walk through the sequence of steps, not to any strict beat. After a few minutes of trial runs to clarify any formations that may cause difficulty, the band starts playing and the participants begin the dance. Usually for the first few repetitions of the steps, there is noticeable confusion on the dance floor. However, once the dancers become more comfortable in the dance, it continues on smoothly.

The band continues until the couple that began the dance at one end of the line has danced with each couple and made it to the other end, or until the dancers are exhausted and are ready to stop. Because of the high level of energy needed for Irish dancing and the continuous movement that happens in ceili dancing, participants, especially those who are not usually Irish dancers, tire quickly. These progressive dances provide an opportunity for all ceili attendees to dance together, creating one large line of Irish dancing bodies. While this portion of the evening is particularly potent for establishing a sense of community, it is also the time when attendees gain a sense of culture or rather, Irish identity. By dancing with other members of the Irish dancing community, non-dancers are able to move beyond the spectator roles that they assume throughout the competition, and become active participants in this cultural activity that is both symbolically Irish as well as Irish by derivation.

By employing symbols of Irishness, the Irish dancing community differentiates its events from other North American gatherings. Hockey tournaments that take place across North America share several characteristics with Irish dancing feiseanna. They attract participants from other cities who come to compete in a weekend-long event. Parents watch their children play, and have casual conversations with other parents in the stands between periods. Still, Irish dancing-related activities are different from such events in that they emphasize the ethnicity of the activity through the symbols that are used. These symbols, which may mean nothing to individuals outside of the Irish dancing or Irish diaspora communities, are potent representations of Irishness to the participants involved, thus contributing to their experience of Irish dancing as a cultural activity.

4.4 Cultural Constructions

Symbols used to create a sense of Irishness among the Irish dancing community are constructed and mediated by the members of the community. The category of ‘symbolic’ in Nahachewsky’s model differs from the other two categories in that the categories of ‘geographic’ and ‘derivative’ are based on actual associations with a place, while the category of ‘symbolic’ deals with ‘imagined’ associations. While some elements of Irish dancing that are located in or derived from Ireland figure in the experience of Irish dancing as a cultural activity, it is the elements that are symbolically Irish that are the most important to the Irish experience.

Many of the symbols used by the Irish dancing community could be termed ‘invented traditions.’ This concept was developed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger who define ‘invented tradition’ as:

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1)

The Irish dancing community employs symbols to suit its purpose of creating a link between the Irish-Canadian community and geographic Ireland. By holding events such as ceilithe where traditions such as ‘ceili dancing’ take place, the community gains a sense of its association with Ireland and its cultural heritage.

In addition to many visual symbols, Irish language is also employed to create a sense of Irishness. Irish terms such as feis, oireachtas, and ceili are used among the Irish dancing community to denote different dancing related events. There are very few Irish speakers in the Western Canadian Irish Dancing Region, and these terms often mark the extent of participants’ knowledge of the Irish language. For example, although the singular forms of these terms are used extensively, the correct plural forms are rarely used. Instead of using the term feiseanna, many people add an ‘s’ sound to feis and say ‘fesh-es.’ ‘Feiseanna’ is however, the most commonly used correct plural form of all of the Irish terms used by the Irish dancing community. The plural form of ceili is rarely heard; most people say ceilis instead of ceilithe. I have never once heard the plural form of oireachtas used in conversation. The two plural forms oireachtais and oiraechtaisi are nearly absent from the written literature on Irish dancing as well; most written documents use ‘oireachtas competitions,’ completely avoiding the plural form. The partial use of

language is an overt example of Gans' symbolic ethnicity where the community chooses symbols without having to alter their daily behaviour, such as learning the entire Irish language.

In addition to names of events, names of people also serve to create a link to the homeland. Mairead (mah-RAID) Michniewski, who speaks Irish, explained that since her children would not have an Irish last name, she and her husband chose to give them Irish first names. Out of five children, three daughters dance, and these girls all have Irish names: Clare, Siobhan (shah-VON), and Roisin (ro-SHEEN). Many child dancers have Irish names, some with the Irish spelling as is the case for the Michniewski sisters, and others with anglicized spellings. By choosing Irish names, many parents seek to instill in their children a sense of their Irish identity.

While elements such as decor, costumes, and language all figure as important symbols of Irishness to the Irish dancing community, perhaps the most interesting symbols are the dancers themselves. By learning how to do Irish dancing, individuals are partaking in a cultural practice. In this sense, Irish dancing schools, through teaching the dance, produce symbols of Irish culture in the dancers that move through their studios. When these dancers perform the dance, they are bringing a sample of Irish culture to people outside of the Irish dancing community. This is particularly evident with the Mattierin Routine, which is invited to perform at numerous local events, banquets and festivals throughout the year. At many of these events, the dancers' performance constitutes the only Irish element of the event. At Heritage Days, a local multi-cultural festival, the Mattierin Routine performs at the Irish pavilion. While the pavilion does sell traditional Irish foods such as Irish stew and soda bread, the dancers and the musicians

that accompany them are the focal point of the exhibit. In that venue, the performers are representatives of the Irish-Canadian community; they themselves become living symbols of Irish culture.

4.5 Experiencing Culture

One of the most significant elements in the experience of Irish dancing is its value as a cultural activity. For many, the fact that this dance form is Irish is an enticing reason to participate. Many of these individuals come to Irish dancing in the hopes of deepening their understanding of Irish culture, and strengthening their own ethnic identity as members of the transnational Irish community. The importance of culture and how it is felt differs from group to group within the Irish dancing community. For some, it is of primary importance, while for others, it is simply an incidental reality of their chosen extra-curricular activity.

For many parents who send their young children to Irish dancing classes, the symbolic value of the dance is an important consideration. They are sending their children for several reasons including physical fitness, development of coordination, social interaction, entertainment, recreation, and also for a cultural experience. Because travelling to Ireland is an expensive undertaking, family trips are usually infrequent if they happen at all. Irish dancing class provides a supplement, and sometimes even a replacement, for actual trips to the homeland.

For parents who come from Ireland themselves or whose families are from Ireland, sending their children to Irish dancing class becomes one way that they may

instill a sense of heritage and cultural pride in their children. In an interview, Mairead Michniewski, a Mattierin parent who grew up in Ireland, told me that the initial reason that she and her husband¹² wanted their children to dance was because of its cultural content. Mairead explained that originally they had not intended that their children compete but rather just learn to dance. She went on to say that it was quite difficult for the children to dance without participating in feiseanna, because Irish dancing is competitive, and participating in feiseanna is part of what it means to be an Irish dancer.

In addition to instilling a sense of cultural identity in their children, parents of dancers often strengthen their own sense of ethnic heritage. When parents send their children to Irish dancing class, they too enter into the Irish dancing community. For many parents, participating in the various Irish dancing functions throughout the year becomes a significant part of their social life. Parents watch the numerous performances that the Routine gives and attend several Irish cultural functions that they might not have otherwise attended if their son or daughter were not a participant. For these parents, cultural festivals become more potent experiences because they take an active role in the planning and execution of the festivals themselves, or in the school's performances at such festivals. As volunteers, spectators and participants, parents experience the Irish-Canadian community through their children's dancing. They become immersed in the music, dance and community of Irish dancing, and as a result, experience a heightened sense of their own Irish identity.

In the past decade, the community of participants in Irish dancing has expanded drastically. What was once a relatively closed community of Irish people and their

¹² Mairead's husband Stef, who grew up in England, is half Polish on his father's side, and English and Irish on his mother's side.

descendants has crossed new boundaries, attracting participants from a range of ethnic backgrounds. For some parents, the ethnic origin of the dance is largely unimportant. Not all parents at the Mattierin School are of Irish heritage. Many of these parents saw *Riverdance*, were impressed by the dance form, and decided to send their children to learn how to do it. For Darla and Terry Nichiporuk, enrolling their daughter in Irish dance was a matter of choosing one dance form over another. “We saw *Riverdance* and were interested in the dance. Also, we liked that in Irish dancing, the girls didn’t wear all the makeup and skimpy costumes that they do in other kinds of dancing.” For these parents and others like them, the cultural aspects of the dance are not a deciding factor when choosing Irish dancing as an extra-curricular activity. Often however, these parents do gain new insights and appreciation for Irish culture through their children’s participation in the dance.

While the cultural aspect of the dance is very important to many parents of dancers, often it is not as important to the child dancers themselves. When I asked a number of child dancers how important it was to them that the dancing that they were learning was Irish, I received a range of responses. Most child dancers under the age of thirteen, although they are enthusiastic participants in the dance, expressed indifference towards the dancing as a cultural activity. The older dancers, however, were excited to do an activity that was specifically Irish, thus exploring part of their Irish cultural heritage.

For the majority of adult dancers, culture figures prominently in their experience of Irish dancing. While there are some adult dancers that simply appreciate the music and dance for its artistic merit while enjoying the communal aspect of the dance, most

adult dancers are drawn to the dance for cultural reasons as well. Many adult dancers at the Mattierin School are either from Ireland or come from families with Irish roots; for them, Irish dancing is a way to strengthen their Irish identity. By becoming active participants, adult dancers immerse themselves in the music and dance and join in a community of enthusiasts of Irish dancing and Irish culture. For them, Irish dancing is a more than a choice of an extra-curricular activity, but also a choice of ethnic identity.

The demographic makeup of the adult class is quite diverse, attracting dancers ranging in age from eighteen to over fifty. Approximately half of Mattierin's adult dance class consists of parents of child dancers in the school. The adult class also covers a range of abilities from beginners to champions. Some of the adult dancers danced as children and returned to it after a hiatus of several years; others began their training as adults. Some adult dancers came from other dancing backgrounds including ballet, Ukrainian, and Chinese dancing. In an interview with Nellie Wong, an adult Irish dancer of Chinese heritage, Nellie expressed a newfound interest and passion for Irish culture. "I was never really interested in Irish culture until I got into the dance. I didn't even know that a four-leaf shamrock meant good luck." She explained that after she started dancing, she started researching Irish culture and developed a passion for it that went beyond the music and dance. She went on to say: "my heart is Irish."

For most teachers and adjudicators, Irish culture is extremely important to their involvement in the dance. The majority of certified teachers and adjudicators are either from Ireland or from an Irish heritage. Many come from a family line of dancers and teachers, and they themselves began dancing as young as four years old. Merv explained that when his parents moved from Ireland to Canada, they became extremely involved in

the Irish dancing community as a way to maintain a sense of their Irish identity. For him, growing up in an Irish immigrant household, music and dance were constantly present, and therefore, so was the culture.

Adjudicator Michael Toal, who spent most of his life in Belfast, Northern Ireland before immigrating to Canada, said that the cultural value of the dance is very important for him. He views Irish dancing as an important venue for showcasing Irish culture throughout the world. “For so long, all people saw were the troubles and the fighting, but now Irish dancing is promoting the positive side.” As a vehicle for maintaining his own ethnic identity, instilling cultural pride in his children, and promoting Ireland around the world, for Michael Toal, Irish dancing is an important link between Irish culture and the people who hold it as their own.

4.6 Conclusion

For many of the participants involved in Irish dancing, strengthening their own Irish identity and deepening their sense of being part of a larger Irish community is a significant incentive for joining the activity. Turino states that:

[m]usic has a great multiplicity of potentially meaningful parameters sounding simultaneously, and its status as a potential collective activity helps explain its particular power to create affect and group identities. (1999: 249)

In the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing, located in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada far from geographic Ireland, Irishness remains a vital element of the dance. While the importance of creating an Irish identity varies among the individual participant groups, there is a general consensus that Irish culture does indeed figure in the experience of Irish dancing.

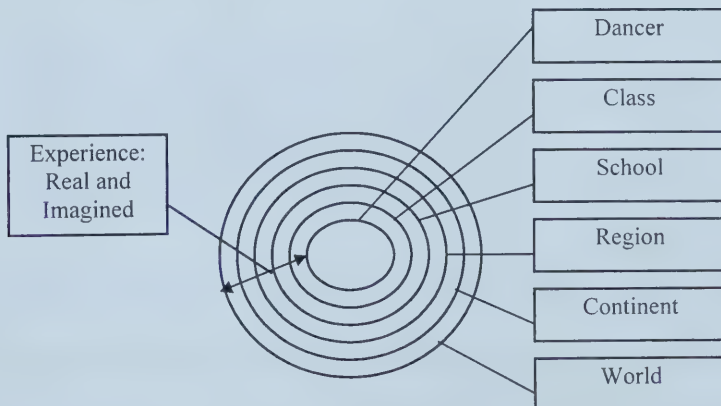
The Nahachewsky model provides a useful way of categorizing and evaluating the various elements that make up the Irish dancing experience. Many details such as decor, costumes, and dancing-related activities contribute to the Irishness of events that take place within the Irish dancing community. Such details are not inherent to the dance, but rather constructions by the community to create a sort of Irish milieu within the context of generic North American culture. By dividing cultural elements into the three categories of geographic, derivative, and symbolic, the Nahachewsky model serves to emphasize the importance of symbols in the experience of Irish dancing as a cultural activity, the most important symbol being the dancers themselves.

Chapter 5 - The Irish Dancing Community

5.1 Introduction

The Irish dancer does not belong to one single community but rather, to a range of communities, from the dance class to the expansive world network of Irish dancing. These communities are not independent groups. The different levels of community intersect in the various arenas where Irish dancing takes place, from performances and competitions to large scale dance shows and print media. Figure 5 is based on Thomas Turino's model of concentric circles with pathways that link the circles, which Turino uses to examine the notion of 'context' and how it influences ethnographic research and reporting (1990). Figure 5 demonstrates the various levels of Irish dancing communities in a diagram of expanding circles, with the various Irish dancing gatherings as a link between the participant groups.

Figure 4: Irish Dancing Communities



Some dancers, through the course of their dancing careers, participate at every level of this diagram through competitions and actual Irish dancing events. For others, however, only the first two or three levels of community are experienced through actual

events. For many of these participants, the broadest levels, including the World and North America, are experienced through the concept of an 'imagined community'.

Benedict Anderson defines 'nation' as imagined political community. He states:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (1991: 6)

For the Irish dancer, the imagined community of Irish dancers worldwide transcends geographic borders, as it exists because the members share the commonality of an activity. While all the members of this worldwide network of Irish dancing participants do not know each other personally, they know that the other members exist, and therefore, imagine them as part of a community.

Similar to Anderson's 'imagined community' is Arjun Appadurai's concept of 'global ethnoscapas.' He states that:

[t]he landscape of group identity - the ethnoscapas – around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous. (1996: 48)

For participants of Irish dancing, it is not necessary to live in the same geographic location or share the same personal history as other participants in order to consider them part of the same community. By participating in the dance form, individuals link themselves to other participants around the world, creating a global web of Irish dancers and supporters.

Related to the notions of ‘imagined community’ and ‘global ethnoscares’ is the role of choice in community-building. Just as members imagine their own participation in a global Irish dancing community with others who are supposedly doing the same, they make an active decision to build and maintain ties to this community. The Irish dancing community is a constructed reality, created by its members and sustained by the various events in which members gather to participate in the activity that links them together, Irish dancing.

5.2 The Dance Class Community

The smallest community of which an Irish dancer is part is his or her class community. This group meets one or more times per week with classes running coincidentally with the North American school year, from the beginning of September until the end of June. This community is constantly shifting as dancers join and quit classes. Still for the most part, the class is established as an entity each year, and often remains essentially intact as the classmates advance together from year to year. For many dancers, their dance class forms an important part of their overall social life, with many of their closest friendships developing from within their dancing peers. Due to the significant time commitment required in the more advanced levels, dance class becomes an important social time for the dancers. Beyond these close friendships, classmates are generally supportive of each other, encouraging one another in their solo dancing, even if they compete against one another in feiseanna throughout the year.

The element of figure dancing also contributes to the class environment. Figure dancing which includes, among others, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 16 hand reels, as well as ceili dances, allow dancers to dance with each other. The experience of dancing with others is very different than the majority of Irish step dancing which is done solo. Dancers must depend on their teammates to remember the sequence of steps, execute them in a stylistic manner that employs good form, while remaining physically parallel to the other dancers in the group. Figure dancing, which is done by dancers of all ages and levels of ability, both strengthens and challenges the group dynamic of the dance class. Breathnach writes:

The less gifted and more numerous members of the company found an outlet for their high spirits in the round or group dances, which, it is said, were devised by the dancing masters to maintain the interest of their less ardent pupils and afford couples an opportunity for colloquing. (1971: 53)

By forcing dancers to work together to create a unified performance, dancers must learn to trust one another. This is much different than when two dancers are learning the same solo dance at the same time in class. For solo dancing, the individual dancer is responsible for his or her own progress. It is up to the dancer to practise outside of the class setting to be able to perform the dance. If the dancer does not practise, it does not affect other members of the dance class to the same extent that it does in figure dancing. For figure dancing, dancers must work hard to learn their own parts of the dance, as well as how their part fits with the other dancers. By working together to achieve a common goal, the dance class community is strengthened.

In the event that one or more dancers does not work as hard as the others to learn his or her part, ill feelings between dancers may arise. In these instances, it is often the dancer's peers who voice their disapproval with the dancer's lack of dedication and practice. In the dance class setting, it is primarily the instructors who correct the mistakes of the dancers. In the case of a dancer who consistently does not meet the expectations of his or her figure dancing team however, the other dancers in the group will often voice their disapproval by becoming hyper-critical of that dancer's performance in the class. The other dancers will point out the mistakes that the delinquent dancer makes, in the hopes that the embarrassment of being reprimanded by one's peers will cause the dancer to work harder. This form of peer pressure can be very effective in maintaining a high standard of performance.

5.3 The School Community

While each dance class at the Mattierin School makes up a community on its own, the school community combines these peer groups of dance classes with other classes as well as other groups such as parents and teachers. The members of each smaller group share a sense of belonging to the larger community of the Mattierin School of Irish Dancing. During each of the two terms in the dancing year, September to December and January to June, the teachers in conjunction with the parents plan a non-dancing-related activity such as recreational swimming in which the child dancers are invited to participate. Merv Bell explains that these activities help to reinforce a sense of school community among the dancers by giving students from the various classes a chance to

interact outside of the school setting, and without the usual components of music, dance, and competition.

The year-end ceili is the highlight of the Mattierin dancing year. This family event takes place in June and includes a meal, silent auction, performance by the various Mattierin students as well as a dance, hosted by the band The Celtics. Dancers are responsible for selling tickets, mostly to friends and family, as well as soliciting donations from local businesses for the silent auction. The silent auction is a fundraising initiative to pay for costumes and other school expenses. This evening gives the dancers an opportunity to perform for their friends and family. It also gives families of dancers an opportunity to meet one another and converse, dance, and enjoy the evening's entertainment together, thus fostering a sense of the extended Mattierin community that includes both dancers and their families.

The school community reaches beyond the dances classes and competitions. Reinforced by its various activities, the school community includes dancers, teachers, parents, and families.

5.4 Attending Feiseanna: The Regional Irish Dancing Community

Beyond the school level of community, there exists a regional dance community. The regions are determined by An Coimisiún, with North America divided into the following regions: Eastern Canada, Western Canada, Eastern USA, New England USA, Mid-Western USA, and Western USA. (Cullinane, 1997: 82) The region of which the Mattierin School is a part is the Western Canadian zone. This zone includes schools from

British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. There are over sixteen schools in the region predominantly from large urban centres, but also from smaller cities.

The regional community exists as an entity, though not usually in contrast to neighbouring regional communities. There are few opportunities for members of different regional communities to meet, as the majority of competitions exist at the regional level. Schools are welcome to travel to feiseanna in other regions. However, due to travel costs and time restraints, most dancers only dance in their region. All dancers are invited to compete at the regional feis level, and the top dancers from various age groups are selected to represent the region at the North American Championship. Because few dancers advance to this level, the majority of dancers in a given region do not experience their regional community as a foil to other communities. Instead, this sense of community is created primarily through attending feiseanna.

The feis weekend is a multi-dimensional event where dancers and their families join in both a competitive and social setting. A typical schedule for the weekend has all figure dancing and adult competitions on Friday night. Competitions for all age groups except adults take place during the day on Saturday. On Saturday evening, there is often a ceili or social evening. Sunday is reserved for trophy championships of all age groups.

Feiseanna are the primary meetings of the regional Irish dancing community. The event, although not closed to the public, does not generally attract viewers from beyond the Irish dancing community. In Alberta alone, there are typically four feiseanna annually, one in Edmonton, one in Fort McMurray, and two in Calgary. These competitions usually take place in hotels; the hotel is an ideal venue for this type of weekend-long competition as the stages can be set up in the different ballrooms. If there

is only one large ballroom in a hotel, the room will usually be divided into two or three smaller rooms so that there are no more than two stages in any given room. This allows for competitions of different dances, which require different music, to take place at the same time. The lobby area or hallway in front of the ballrooms is usually where the vendors set up tables to sell their products. Smaller meeting rooms are used for organizing volunteers, posting results, as well as for the adjudicators' lounge area, and a concession area.

Holding feiseanna in hotels is convenient for families who have traveled from out of town. Families are able to eliminate the hassle of traveling between the feis venue and their place of accommodation. This is particularly helpful as the competitions often start as early as 8 a.m. and the ceili, if there is one, does not usually end until after midnight. The schedule of the weekend's events is intense, and it is convenient for dancers and their families to have a room in the hotel for sustenance breaks, changing in and out of costumes, fixing hair, or taking a short mid-day nap to re-energize between competitions.

Dancers compete in groups according to their age and ability. Because dancers compete against mostly the same group of competitors from dance to dance, they often get to know many of their peers. Short conversations take place as dancers line up waiting to go on stage, between competitions, as well as in the foyer of the hotel as dancers warm up. It is not unusual to see teenage dancers from different schools socializing in the lobby as they take turns performing their dances for each other. While the dancers that critique and compliment their fellow dancers in warm up usually come from the same school, some dancers from different schools also give feedback to each other. Many dancers from different cities know each other because one dancer danced

with a certain school and then, because of their family's relocation to another city, had to change schools. The ties built when the dancers were at the same school remain strong, and feiseanna become opportunities for old friends to reconnect.

Although not all feiseanna include a social evening as part of the weekend, several include a ceili on the Saturday night. For many, the ceili is the highlight of the feis weekend. It provides a social dimension that is absent from the rest of the weekend's activities. The conversations between spectators that take place throughout the feis weekend outside of the ceili are governed by time restrictions, such as when one's child is dancing or when the results of a certain competition will be posted. The conversations at the ceili, however, are free from such restraints. Often conversations at the ceili gravitate toward Irish dancing related topics such as current trends in costumes, or trading tips on the best way to curl hair, a characteristic feature of the female Irish dancer's performance attire. Discussions of current events, movies, music and popular culture also take place. There is also some nostalgic re-visiting of Ireland, as attendees, particularly dancers' parents and grandparents who came from Ireland, reminisce about the homeland. The ceili provides a forum for such discussions, as well as a celebration of Irish culture through music and dance.

In addition to allowing time for families involved in Irish dancing to converse with one another, the figure dancing portion of the evening provides an opportunity for the community to dance together. Progressive dances are popular at ceilithe as they can be done with any number of participants. They are not limited to four, six, eight, or sixteen dancers, as are many other figure dances. Because everyone is encouraged to join in the progressive dances, the emphasis is not on the technical execution of the dance

steps, but rather on the communal aspect of the dance. Mairead Michniewski, who grew up doing ceili dancing at school and at ceilithe, looks forward to this portion of the evening because “if you don’t get a chance to talk to people at other tables throughout the night, the progressive dance gives you a chance to see everyone who’s there and dance with them at least once.” Progressive dances form an important link between dancers and non-dancer participants of the Irish dancing community.

5.4.1 The Musicians

The musicians play a prominent role in the feis weekend. The number of feis musicians is very small compared to the number of dancers; the 1999 Western Canadian Oireachtas hosted over five hundred dancers and three musicians. Yet, there is still a bond that exists between dancers and feis musicians. Usually because of availability and travel costs, the same musicians play a given feis year after year. Dancers begin to recognize and appreciate stylistic differences in the playing of the various musicians, and develop favourites.

In an interview with Merv Bell, I asked why he chose not to obtain his ADCRG certification. He replied that the certification would make him an adjudicator and he would much prefer to be a musician. He explained that “when you’re an adjudicator, you’re the judge, and there’s a gap between you and the dancers. When you’re a musician, you’re everybody’s friend.”

The senior dancers and champions have, for the most part, the friendliest relationships with the musicians out of all the dancers. This is because many of the same

musicians have been playing for them at various feiseanna from early childhood when they began Irish dancing. With so many dancers at the various feiseanna, the musicians tend to recognize both the dancers they have seen year after year, as well as those who do particularly well and compete at the highest level of their respective age categories.

Feis musicians form a community themselves. Because many of the same musicians play feis after feis, they get to know one another, and develop a rapport of camaraderie. For most of the weekend's competitions, the musicians play at different stages. For the open championships that take place at the end of the weekend however, two musicians will often play together. At numerous feiseanna throughout the Western Canadian Region, musicians Pat King and Merv Bell will play together for the open championship competitions. Merv, who plays accordion for the majority of the weekend's events, will switch to piano accompaniment so that the duo can perform together. While some musicians prefer playing solo, Pat King and Merv Bell are comfortable playing with each other. In addition to having complimentary musical styles, these musicians are professional colleagues and friends, and take advantage of the opportunities they have to make music together.

5.4.2 The Parents and Feis Volunteers

Feiseanna could not take place without the time and efforts of a dedicated team of volunteers. The volunteers are primarily parents of dancers, although adult dancers as well as members of the local Irish clubs and social organizations in the host city also

help. In addition to the volunteers that help with the planning of the feis prior to the actual weekend, volunteers are also needed to help throughout the weekend.

There are several positions at a feis that are filled by volunteers. Volunteers are needed to work the food concession, sell printed programs and tickets to the feis and the ceili. Volunteers are also needed to serve a hospitality function. This includes bringing food and drink, usually water or coffee, to the musicians and adjudicators who must remain at their stations for long sets of competitions. Volunteers also help in facilitating the actual competitions, which includes assembling the groups of dancers competing in the various competitions, counting the dancers to see if any are missing, lining up the dancers before they go on stage, and for the competitions with young children, counting them in.

The task of counting in the young dancers is often done by an adult dancer or one of the dance teachers; it must be someone who is familiar with the structure of Irish dance music and who knows when the appropriate starting points occur throughout the music. Once the musician begins playing for a competition, the volunteer stands behind the line of dancers at the back of the stage and counts measures of music. The young dancers who cannot yet identify the eight-measure phrases of traditional Irish dance music depend on the volunteer who counts the measures aloud, indicating when the new phrase of music begins and when the dancer should begin.

The other two primary volunteer positions at a feis require more experience and knowledge of Irish dancing. One position is that of scorekeeper; usually there are two scorekeepers assigned to each stage. The responsibilities include processing the sheets completed by the adjudicator and preparing them for the announcements of results, either

orally or by posting. This is not a particularly difficult post but does require that the volunteer be able to work under a time pressure. The task is done in pairs, with one volunteer who has done scorekeeping before, and another volunteer who is trained ‘on-the-job’ by his or her scorekeeping partner in preparation for future feiseanna.

The final volunteer position is that of announcer. The challenge of the position is not the announcing itself, but rather facilitating the competitions. The announcer is responsible for keeping the competitions moving at an appropriate pace, never lagging. The announcer must inform the audience and dancers of the upcoming competitions on the stage or stages for which they are responsible. While the planning committee organizes the program of events and which stages will be used for which competitions long before the actual feis weekend, it is the announcer who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the events run smoothly and competitions are not missed.

One task that is often the most challenging for announcers is coordinating stages with music. If there is one musician playing for more than one stage, with different competitions of the same dance going on simultaneously, the announcer must halt competition on one stage until the other stage is finished with that dance. For example, one musician may be playing for two stages simultaneously, the ‘9 and Under Beginner Reel’ on one stage, and the ‘11 and Under Novice Reel’ on the next stage. If the ‘9 and Under Beginner Reel’ competition is finished first, the announcer cannot allow that age group to move on to the ‘9 and Under Light Jig’ competition until the ‘11 and Under Novice Reel’ competition is also ready to move on to the next dance, the light jig. The position of announcer is challenging, because in order to coordinate the resources such as

the musicians, stage, and time as efficiently as possible, the announcer must have keen organizational skills and the ability to manage people.

5.4.3 The Vendors

As part of every feis, there is an opportunity for vendors to sell their wares. Vendors from around the region travel to various feiseanna, selling miscellaneous Irish dancing items such as dancing shoes, costumes, wigs, jewelry, as well as hair accessories and curlers. These vendors form yet another part of the regional Irish dancing community.

At one feis I spoke to a vendor about the Irish dancing community. He asserted that there does exist a “small town feel” amongst the Irish dance community. He explained that since the times when the Irish dancing community does gather, the members are in such close quarters, having a sense of community is a necessity. This particular vendor, a small businessman in one of the region’s major cities, said that as a businessman, he is often leery of taking personal cheques. However, he said that in the four years that he has been traveling to feiseanna as a vendor, he has only ever been given one cheque for which he was not reimbursed. He also noted that usually the people who attend feiseanna are very honest. He explained how he is able to display an assortment of Irish dancing shoes, and have confidence in knowing that if someone is looking through them and finds the pair they want, they will approach him to pay for them. “This doesn’t mean that kids won’t walk off with something small,” he gestures to a selection of Celtic bracelets and necklaces attached to a single wooden pole, “but that’s why these are on a

stick [as a security measure, rather than lying flat and open on the table like other larger items for sale]”.

This sense of community felt by vendors extends past the trust of patrons. Because the region’s vendors all travel to the various feiseanna, they see each other and work at tables next to each other several times a year. One vendor explained how he does not always display his full range of products depending on which other vendors are at the feis. He explained that since one of the other vendors only sells one particular brand of shoes, and was the first distributor of that brand in the city where the feis was taking place, he does not display his own selection of this brand name. Even though he is a licensed distributor of the product and is thus legally within his selling territory, he does not advertise that he sells this product because of an understanding between him and another vendors. Elaborating on the variety of products that he sells including jewelry, dancing shoes, as well as current and back issues of Irish Dancing Magazine, the vendor explained that his display table changes from feis to feis. He said that he does not display jewelry if there is another vendor who sells only that type of jewelry and no other products. There is an understood division of territory that exists among the vendors. An unspoken honour system guides this division.

In addition to not treading on each other’s selling territories, there is a definite bond of camaraderie between the vendors. This particular vendor spoke of the other vendors with respect, remarking on how their children have also become friends with other vendors and their families. The vendors not only make up a community themselves, but are also part of the larger Irish dancing regional community. Many vendors were dancers themselves at one time, or have children who dance. Vendors are

familiar with the different roles within the Irish dancing community including those of parents, volunteers, and feis organizers, as many of them have played or still play these roles. Parents and dancers recognize many of the vendors from feis to feis, and often spend part of their weekend visiting with vendors while checking out the latest developments in footwear, costumes, and hair products.

The regional community is made up of dancers and their families from a number of local centres. With feiseanna as the primary meeting places for this community, the orientation towards family participation is emphasized. John Cullinane writes:

The feiseanna in North America are social occasions for the Irish community and are very much family-oriented affairs... [Attending feiseanna in different cities] helps to consolidate the Irish community and promote the culture. Friendships are made among the young Irish dancers that often last a lifetime and not infrequently lead to marriage.” (1994: 199)

5.5 The World Irish Dancing Community

Contrary to the other levels of the Irish dancing community, the world Irish dancing community is predominantly an imagined one. (Anderson, 1983) Most members of the world community only know a select few of the other members, predominantly from their own region. Still, they are aware of the international network of other Irish dancers worldwide.

Annemarie Gallagher writes that “like ‘home’ and ‘diaspora’, the term ‘community’ is bound up with strategies for inventing identity and for associating with or, conversely, disassociating from other identities.” (1994: 364) One way that the

members of the imagined Irish dancing community gain a sense of their collective existence is through the feis circuit as moderated by An Coimisiún. Because only the students of certified Irish dancing instructors are allowed to compete in feiseanna, the competitions become a way to link Irish dancers with each other but also distinguish Irish dancers from participants in other dance forms.

Feis competitions take place in the different Irish dancing regions around the world with a particular concentration in the United Kingdom, Australia, and North America. For dancers in the Western Canadian region, feiseanna occur several times throughout the year in different locations from Vancouver, British Columbia to Winnipeg, Manitoba. At this level, the top dancers in the preliminary and open championship competitions qualify to compete at the North American championships, often referred to as ‘Nationals.’

Oireachtais occur once annually in each region. These are similar to feis competitions, only larger, attracting more dancers from further centres. At this level, the top four or five dancers in the open championship categories qualify to compete in the World Championships. Competitive dancers of all age groups strive to qualify for the Worlds. Children as young as nine years and under advance to the World Championships, many qualifying for and competing in the competition year after year. The Worlds provide an opportunity for dancers from different regions around the globe to meet, perform for, and watch each other.

This world community is not only experienced through the competitive circuit, which for the top dancers, culminates with the World Championships. It is also experienced through print and electronic media. Magazines and web sites provide a

forum for Irish dancers and fans of the dance form to ask questions, to see what is happening in Irish dancing around the world, and to gain an awareness of the expanse of this imagined community.

The widely distributed¹³ “Irish Dancing Magazine” is one example of print media dedicated to Irish dancing. Printed in Bristol, UK, this monthly magazine’s primary audience is child dancers from around the world ranging in age from approximately nine to sixteen years of age. Catering to this age group, the magazine has a reading level that is appropriate for the child reader, accompanied by many colourful illustrations and photos. Regular features include Irish dancing news, letters, a “penpals” section where dancers from around the world can find penpals who share their love of Irish dancing, letters, the “dancer’s gallery” which shows photographs that dancers have sent in of themselves in their costumes, often posed with a trophy in hand, “this month’s artists” which exhibits drawings of Irish dancers, submitted by child readers, as well as listings of feis dates, Irish dancing shows tour dates, and Irish dancing schools in the various regions. There is also advertising for Irish dancing products such as costumes, shoes, and wigs. Special features include stories on Irish dancing shows, profiles of professional dancers or teachers, results of various National competitions and the World Championships, as well as other Irish dancing related events.

In addition to print media, Internet web sites have become a forum for amateur Irish dancers around the world to connect with each other through web-rings and postings. These web sites address a range of Irish dancing-related topics from fan pages in praise of different professional dancers and pages on various Irish dancing schools, to

¹³ Approximately 25% of the dance students at Mattierin subscribe to this magazine.

informative pages that explain the history of Irish dancing, give results of past feiseanna, oireachtais, and National and World Championships, and inform viewers of upcoming competitions, shows and activities. Through web rings and postings, dancers can connect with each other. The Internet has also become a primary site of commerce for vendors of Irish dancing costumes, shoes, and paraphernalia. Vendors can reach potential consumers from around the world, displaying photographs of merchandise on their web sites, and often offering a secure connection where viewers can purchase on-line using their credit card.

Beyond print media and the Internet, dance shows also figure in the experience of the world community of Irish dancing. For many participants in Irish dancing, their first exposure to this dance form was by viewing a dance show such as *Riverdance* or *Lord of the Dance* either live or on television. These shows have brought Irish dancing to a new audience, familiarizing the general public with the form. Merv Bell predicts that *Riverdance*, the first Irish dancing show with widespread public appeal, will continue to thrive on the stage, securing a similar position as Broadway hits such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserables*. Through performances and workshops with Irish dancing schools, the touring casts of the professional Irish dancing shows link dancers from various local and regional levels to the top performers of the world Irish dancing community.

In addition to attracting new participants to competitive Irish dancing, these shows and others like them have created a new fan base around the world of non-dancers who have become enthusiastic spectators and viewers of the shows, both live and on video. While many of these fans of Irish dancing do come from an Irish background, the

fan base is certainly not limited to Irish descendants. With *Riverdance* troupes touring four continents, the popularity of Irish dancing has extended far beyond the worldwide Irish community.

Merv and Patti Bell have worked to narrow the gap between their school and the professional Irish dancing community. In the summer of 1999, Merv and Patti arranged for two members of the *Riverdance* troupe that was touring through Edmonton at the time, to conduct a workshop with students at Mattierin. The advanced child dancers were invited to attend the two hour-long workshop with Kerry Houston and Ronan McCormack of the *Riverdance* Lagan troupe. Because of my research for this project, I was generously invited to videotape the workshop. The duo began the workshop by leading the young dancers in warm-up exercises. After that, they watched the child dancers perform their dances, offering critiques and advice on how to improve their steps. Most of their comments echoed the comments that Mattierin teachers had been offering throughout the year. As a result, the child dancers gained new inspiration in their dancing, new respect for their teachers, as well as a very real experience of the worldwide community of Irish dancing that links them to their role models in professional Irish dancing troupes.

5.6 The Irish Sport and Social Society of Edmonton

The Irish Sport and Social Society (ISSS) or simply the Irish Club, deserves attention in a chapter on the Irish dancing community. The majority of dancers have very little contact with the club, except for the occasional performance at the club itself, or at

other local ethnic festivals that the ISSS helps to organize. For some dancers however, especially those of Irish descent, the ISSS is an important organization in a dancer and his or her family's experience of Irish culture.

The ISSS is a private club for members and guests only. There is a sign on the door that after three visits as a guest, one must purchase a membership. The club facility, located on the north side of Edmonton resembles a banquet hall with a full kitchen, a bar, a dance floor, and a large area for tables and chairs. The carpet is green, and pictures of different areas of Ireland are displayed around the room. There are several photographs of professional soccer teams, called 'football' teams by the Irish. Hanging behind the bar is another photograph of the local Gaelic football team, made up of members of the club and sponsored by the ISSS organization. In the corner of the room, there is a fireplace, with a sculpture of St. Patrick on the mantle.

Throughout the year, the ISSS hosts several concerts of Irish traditional music, bringing in local and national performing artists and groups, as well as solo artists and groups from Ireland. The ISSS is also a key player in local festivals and events where Irish culture is represented. The Irish club organizes the annual Edmonton feis and the Ireland pavilion for the Heritage Days Festival, and generally supports local cultural events such as the St. Patrick's Day Parade and Ceili sponsored by O'Byrne's Pub, a local establishment. In addition to these events, the club also acts as a meeting place for Edmonton's Irish community. Just as in Ireland where people frequent their corner pub, often referred to as their 'local', the ISSS fills the void of the corner pub among the Edmonton community of Irish descendants.

At the Edmonton Irish club, people from regions across Ireland gather together, thus fostering a community of Irish-Canadians. Here people gather to sit at the bar and have a drink, and chat with others who are there. This is also the meeting place for local sessions. A session is an informal gathering where musicians come to play with whomever else is there. There are usually between four and ten musicians and the instruments played, although they vary from session to session, are usually fiddle, bodhran, guitar, concertina or accordion, flute, whistle, and occasionally banjo and uilleann pipes.

The local community of Irish dancing does not really exist as such. There are three Irish dancing schools in Edmonton whose students participate in feiseanna and whose Routines perform on a regular basis at various local events. There are other dance schools in Edmonton that teach Irish dancing but whose teachers do not necessarily have a TCRG designation, a requirement for students to enter into feiseanna. As a result, these schools are absent from feiseanna, the primary meeting place of the Irish dancing community. By limiting who is able to participate in certain key events, competition plays a paramount role in defining membership in the Irish dancing community.

While the teachers from the three primary Irish dancing schools in Edmonton all know each other, and many of their students recognize each other from the various feiseanna and festivals throughout the year, the local schools do not gather as a group. The only time that they gather outside of the regional feiseanna is for local Irish events, often organized by the Irish club. The ISSS is connected to each Irish dancing school to varying degrees and as a result, provides a link between the various schools, as well as with the local Irish community. While not all Irish dancers and their families frequent the

club, almost all partake, at some point in the year, in one or more of the activities organized by the club. In this sense, the ISSS does enter into the dancers' experience of Irish dancing by providing them with opportunities to perform and showcase Irish culture through music and dance.

5.7 Experiencing Community

Every individual member of the Irish dancing community experiences a sense of this community in their own unique way. There are however, general trends in how the various groups such as child dancers, adult dancers, parents, teachers, musicians and adjudicators, experience the community. As in many sports, Irish dancing is broken down into several levels of community through competition. Although the element of competition does sometimes challenge relations between participants, for the most part, it acts as a key element in bringing together participants from different geographic locations and defining them as a community through the shared activity of Irish dancing.

As dancers progress from beginners to world champions, they experience more and more levels of the dancing communities. Many dancers never advance past the regional level, yet through the competitive circuit, others experience the Irish dancing communities from the class level to the World Championships.

Competition is not, however, the only dimension to the Irish dancing experience. Other aspects include performances, social gatherings, as well as the actual process of learning to dance. While the various social groups may either experience or be aware of

the different levels of community, the proportion of the communities that make up their personal experience varies greatly.

The beginner child dancer's experience of the Irish dancing community is primarily focused on the class level. The child attends the weekly class, learning the basics of the dance form while socializing with his or her peers in the class. By participating in social excursions with other dancers from the various classes, the beginner child dancer will likely experience the school community also. Usually after one year, or in less time if the child learns quickly, the child dancer will participate in his or her first feis. This will mark the dancer's initial entry into the regional community as an active participant. For the beginner child dancer, there are fewer opportunities for social interactions with other members of the Irish dancing communities, thus limiting the terrain for communal experiences. As the child moves past the beginner level, the opportunities for social interaction with the various participant groups increase, and the child experiences a larger range of the communities.

Child dancers who have advanced beyond the beginner stage, have a different experience of the Irish dancing community. While their class community figures in their overall experience, for many, the school level of community is more strongly felt. In addition to their weekly dance classes, the more advanced child dancers attend extra rehearsals to learn the performance routine, which they will perform with the group at events throughout the year. The Routine troupe is made up of dancers¹⁴ from several dance classes, and it is with this group that the advanced child dancers spend most of their dancing time.

¹⁴ Approximately 20-24 dancers chosen from the school's 110 dance students participate in the Routine.

The more advanced child dancers participate in both solo and figure dancing in feiseanna, while beginners are generally limited to competing in one or two solo dances and no figure dancing. Although teams are made up predominantly of dancers from the same class, often the larger dances require several participants and combine students from different classes. When dancers compete in the figure dancing competitions at feiseanna, they often gain a heightened sense of school pride. Because the figure dancing teams compete against teams from other dancing schools around the region, the dancers not only represent their individual team but also their school. The figure dancing competitions emphasize the school identity over the identity of the individual dancer. In addition to the element of teamwork and unity that is required to perform figure dancing, the common school identity is apparent in the costumes that are worn. Dancers wear their school dance uniform, thus adding a new element of school pride to the competition, and giving dancers a sense of their school's place within the larger regional community.

The advanced child dancer¹⁵ also experiences the regional community through feiseanna. The weekend-long competitions allow child dancers to meet and compete against other members of the community. The feis ceili also contributes to this experience, allowing dancers to meet other dancers that are not in their particular categories of the competition. The majority of child dancers do compete in feiseanna, although due to time and monetary constraints, some only compete in ones that are in their city or within driving distance.

¹⁵ I collected information regarding the experience of child dancers through conversations with a number of dancers of different ages and at different levels of ability, as well as through conversations with their parents.

Some child dancers do experience the world level of the Irish dancing community, although these individuals are fewer than those whose experience is confined to the regional level and smaller. Few child dancers experience this level through competition, as it is very difficult to advance to the national and world levels. Other child dancers experience the world community in a more ‘imagined’ way through print and electronic media, buying subscriptions to magazines and reading or writing about Irish dancing on the internet.

Most child dancers have seen the large-scale shows live or on television, and while this experience does enter into their overall experience of Irish dancing, they are often not aware of how being an audience member can somehow link them to other members of an ‘imagined’ world Irish dancing community. The advanced child dancer’s experience of the Irish dancing communities is made up primarily of the school level, with the class and regional levels also figuring prominently. The national and world levels do not figure in the majority of child dancers’ experience although for some, they do form a small portion of their overall experience of the Irish dancing community.

The adult dancer has a similar experience to that of the beginner child dancer. The adult dancer’s primary experience of the Irish dancing community is centered on the dance class level. Dancers gather every week in dance class to learn to dance, listen to the music, and socialize with their fellow adult dancers. The bulk of the adult dancer’s time spent Irish dancing is done in the class, whereas for the child dancers, there are often many other hours spent rehearsing and performing with the Routine.

Very few of the adult dancers participate in the Routine. The top dancers of the adult class, all of whom danced as children but who have now come back to dancing after

a hiatus, participate in the troupe. They do not perform for every Routine performance but rather, are invited to perform for a select number of performances throughout the year. The Routine adult dancers are not factored into every segment of the choreographed routine, because the Routine must be a cohesive performance whether or not they are present. Often the adult dancers perform their own mini routine that makes up one section of the overall performance. This may include figure dancing, or solo dances done in tandem or in a line. The adult dancers also perform in the Routine's finale. Because of its crowd-pleasing aesthetic and powerful image, the finale usually consists of the most advanced dancers of the Routine performing a hard shoe dance in a line. The dance emulates the *Riverdance* style, which focuses on the uniformity of the dancers in a line across the stage.

For the rest of the adult dancers, their experience of the school community is generally limited to representing the school in the figure dancing competitions of feiseanna, as well as activities such as the year-end ceili and volunteering at the local feis. The majority of the adult dancers at the Mattierin School do compete in feiseanna, although there are some who prefer not to compete. By competing, adult dancers gain a sense of their presence within the rest of the regional community, as well as a sense of security in knowing that there are other adult dancers out there who are also at the beginner and novice levels of dancing. For adult dancers, competitions are often more social than they are competitive. While some adult dancers are competitive, the majority of adult dancers compete for fun. They are encouraging of one another, and are often as excited to cheer on their classmates, as they are to compete themselves.

For adult dancers, the notion of community on the various levels tends to be an important factor in choosing Irish dancing as a recreational activity. Adult dancers know that they will never become professional dancers or world champions. Their reasons for dancing are for fitness, for a cultural experience, and most importantly for fun. For adult dancers, Irish dancing is an opportunity to meet other adults with the common interest of Irish dancing, and to learn together how to perform this dance form that they all enjoy.

Adult dancers have a different level of participation in the Irish dancing communities, and therefore their experience of the community is not the same as parents of child dancers. Even though many adult dancers are parents of child dancers, their role in the Irish dancing community is different than that of other parents. By participating themselves, adult dancers take an active role in learning the dance form, thus setting them apart from parents who watch from the sidelines. Because of their willingness to try to learn and perform Irish dancing past their prime years for physical activity, adult dancers form a strong community of their own, one that is independent from the community of parents of child dancers, but still within the boundaries of the general Irish dancing community.

Parents also have a unique experience of the Irish dancing community. Many parents become very involved in their children's extra-curricular activities; Irish dancing is no exception. Parents help out in numerous ways, driving their children to and from class and rehearsal, as well as attending numerous performances and feiseanna, often devoting entire weekends to travelling to another city for a feis. Parents volunteer with fundraising initiatives, event planning, as well as filling the various positions at local feiseanna. The Emerald Isle Dancer's Association, Mattierin's parent association, is also

a community in itself. Parents attend meetings and organize events through the year to raise money for the dancing school. For parents who are active participants in this association, they experience both the school community, as well as that of the parent committee within the overall school community.

For parents, the majority of their experience of the Irish dancing community is focused on the school level. Parents get to know the parents of other dancers, often forming strong friendships with each other. Their attendance at events and performances also connects them to the Mattierin community, by providing opportunities for them to socialize with other Mattieirin parents. By attending feiseanna, the parent's experience of the community is expanded to include the regional level. Parents often get to know the parents of children who dance at the same age level as their children through conversations that take place at feiseanna during the dance competitions or while waiting for results. When parents volunteer at regional feiseanna, they mostly work with other members of the school's parent committee, and as a result, this experience of the region is still somewhat focused on the school level.

Much of the parent's involvement at the national and international level is dictated by their child's achievement in the dance form. Parents of children who advance to this level of competition often accompany their children to the competition events. Still, for most parents, the experience of the Irish dancing community is centered on the school level.

As trained professionals for whom Irish dancing is their livelihood, adjudicators, feis musicians, and teachers of Irish dancing experience the Irish dancing community differently than the dancers whom they judge, accompany and teach. Their circles of

professional colleagues extend beyond the regional level that binds most dancers, and expands to national and international levels. The requirements to become a certified teacher or adjudicator of Irish dancing necessitate that the individual has experience as a champion dancer. Based on both knowledge and the physical ability to dance, those who achieve the TCRG and ADCRG certifications all share a common personal history of being dancers. Musicians, while many did dance at some point in their lives, do not all share this personal history. Some are simply talented musicians with a keen sense of how to play music for dancers. These three participant groups all play a role within the overall Irish community, although the groups also form smaller communities themselves.

For Michael Toal ADCRG, a certified adjudicator of Irish dancing, his experience of the Irish dancing community is primarily of the worldwide community. Because he adjudicates feiseanna across North America and in Europe, his circle of colleagues extends around the world. For the major competitions such as the North American Championships and the World Championships, adjudicators are flown in from as far as Australia. Michael explained that most adjudicators would know nearly all of the others who have achieved the ADCRG certification, except for maybe the newly qualified adjudicators. Because the number of adjudicators is relatively small, those who are certified are in high demand. By travelling great distances to different feiseanna and oireachtais, adjudicators meet and get to know their professional colleagues from around the world. At the various competitions, adjudicators associate primarily with the other adjudicators. Michael explained that although he may go for a drink with the musicians during a feis weekend, he would probably not keep in touch with them beyond seeing them at feiseanna.

While the adjudicator's experience of the Irish dancing community is worldwide, the professional musician's experience is often regional or national. Merv Bell, explained that as a musician, his community is predominantly a North American one. Merv plays at competitions in both Canada and the United States, and although he has had offers to play in Europe, because of time restraints, he declines. Merv explained that if he chose to, he could play a feis almost every weekend of the year. Merv has a family, a non-dancing career, as well as his own dancing school, so he chooses to play at only a portion of the feiseanna to which he is invited.

Experienced musicians who are familiar with the repertoire of Irish dance music including the thirty set dances, are in high demand. Often at feiseanna, musicians who are only familiar with a portion of this repertoire are hired to play for the beginner and novice categories. These musicians do not usually travel to feiseanna outside of their region. For the preliminary and open champions however, musicians must be prepared to play whichever set dance the dancer has chosen. Musicians who know the repertoire and play it well have no trouble finding work. Once a musician has broken into, and established him/herself within the feis circuit by playing smaller regional feiseanna, the offers to play large oireachtais often follow shortly. For other musicians that make Irish dance music a full-time career, their experience of the Irish dancing community can reach the international level, working with Irish dance musicians from around the world.

Teachers experience the Irish dancing community in a different way than musicians and adjudicators do. By becoming a certified teacher, an individual links his or herself to an entire network of others who have also achieved their TCRG designation. Still, the teacher's primary experience of community is focused on his or her own school.

Patti Bell explained that while the teachers at the Mattierin School want to be respected in the regional community for being good teachers, the most important thing to them is the school community. Merv and Patti strive to create a safe, nurturing environment for children to learn and have fun, and by doing so, create a strong school community.

5.8 Conclusion

The Irish dancing community consists of several different levels of community. The levels range from the most intimate class setting to the imagined worldwide community of Irish dancing. The level of community that figures most prominently in an individual's overall experience varies from participant to participant. There are however, general trends in how the different participant groups, including dancers, parents, teachers, musicians and adjudicators, experience the levels of community.

The experience of the community is dynamic, not static. It may change throughout the year as activities of the participant change. It may also evolve throughout a lifetime as an individual moves between participant groups, as in the case of the child dancer who moves to champion, and eventually on to the roles of teacher and adjudicator. While nearly every dancer, parent, teacher, musician, and adjudicator is in some way tied to each other through this dynamic community, their individual experiences of this same community can be very different.

Most dancers, at some point, experience most of the levels of the diagram, from the actual communities of the dance class through the regional community, to the imagined global community of Irish dancing participants. Musicians and adjudicators,

while they are part of the regional, national and world communities, do not participate at the more intimate levels of the dance school or class communities. Instead, these groups form their own intimate peer groups within the overall dancing community.

Turino's diagram of expanding circles is a useful tool for mapping the various levels of communities of participants of Irish dancing, as it does not limit itself to dancers. A model that does not include the pathways between circles assumes that all participants experience the same nuclear community of the dance class. Turino's model however, does not exclude non-dancer participants such as musicians, adjudicators, and parents who are participants in the larger communities but not the more intimate ones. The pathways that link the circles to each other can be understood in terms of the individuals' experiences of the various communities through performances, competitions, and even surfing the Internet and connecting with other Irish dancing participants around the world.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I have sought to examine what makes up the Irish dancing experience and how this experience is related to identity. By investigating the different participant groups that make up the Irish dancing community, including child dancers, parents, adult dancers, teachers, adjudicators, and musicians, I have evaluated how their experiences of the dance differ from one another as well as what elements remain the same.

In reviewing the dance itself, I have drawn on research in the field of ballet to examine how dance can develop from a folk tradition to an elevated dance form. I have also used the model of the Western classical music canon to look at the repertoire of Irish step dance and how the narrowing of styles has taken place through competition, as governed by the Irish Dancing Commission.

In my analysis of Irish dancing as a cultural activity, I have used a model developed by Andriy Nahachewsky. This model serves to sort out elements of the dance form that are symbolically Irish from other elements that are free from such associations, thus highlighting the factors that contribute to the experience of Irish dancing as an Irish activity. It is these factors that ultimately strengthen the participants' sense of their own Irish identity. In this section, I have also drawn on the concept of 'invented tradition' as developed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger and how this concept applies to the traditions and practices of the Irish dancing community today.

In my inquiry into the Irish dancing community, I have used a model developed by Thomas Turino. This model (Figure 4) is constructed as a series of expanding circles with pathways that link the circles to each other. In its application to the Irish dancing community, the pathways that link the various levels of community are the encounters that an individual experiences within these communities. I have also drawn on Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community' and Arjun Appadurai's concept of 'global ethnoscares' to explore the broadest levels of the Irish dancing community.

6.2 Results of the Study: The Irish Dancing Experience

The following section is a brief overview of the similarities and differences in experience between participant groups. The Irish dancing experience is made up of four key components: the dance itself, music, culture, and community. These elements are present in the experience of all Irish dancing participant groups.

In terms of the dance itself, all participant groups experience the canon of repertoire of Irish dancing, and indirectly the role of the Irish Dancing Commission as the governing body that maintains this canon. The breadth of this experience is limited by the ability of the participant. For example, the less experienced participant groups such as adult and child dancers (beginner-novice) experience less of the repertoire than do champions, teachers and adjudicators. Another difference in the experience of the dance itself is the context in which the dance is performed. For adult dancers and less experienced child dancers, the context in which the dance is experienced is usually limited to the class and regional feis settings. For the champion dancers, this experience

is heightened by their participation in the Routine, as well as in higher levels of competition such as the North American and world championships.

For the majority of participants in Irish dancing, music was the initial contact with the dance. For some, this has meant listening to Irish dance music as a child, while for others, music has been an interest that came later in life. Except perhaps for parents who do not have an intimate knowledge of the dance rhythms and structures, all participant groups have experienced music as a governing body of the dance. For dancers, teachers and adjudicators, music has served to indicate which steps should be done and how they should be executed. For musicians and dancer-musicians, the experience of music is even more potent, as they move beyond simply dancing to the music to creating it as well.

Irish dancing as a cultural activity is experienced by most participant groups as relating to a sense of ethnic identity. There are participants in Irish dancing, namely some parents and young child dancers, for whom the fact that the dance form is Irish is largely unimportant. Still, for the majority of participants, the association of the dance form with Ireland is significant. In past decades, when Irish dancing in North America was done almost exclusively by members of the Irish diaspora, this association may have been with geographic Ireland as homeland. Today however, the association is with Ireland as a concept, a deterritorialized symbol of what Ireland should be, free from the political, social, and economic reality of the country as it exists, and an overt example of symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1996).

Community remains an important element in the experience of Irish dancing for all participant groups. By taking part in events such as competitions, performances, and

even dance classes, individuals form bonds with other participants. The different levels of community are not felt to the same extent across the participant groups. For the less experienced dancers, the more intimate communities such as school and the dance class form the most significant portion of their overall experience of the community. For parents and teachers, the primary experience of community is centered around the dance school. For adjudicators and musicians however, the broader levels of community are experienced and these professionals form their own peer groups within the worldwide Irish dancing community.

The experience of Irish dancing as a community can be understood in terms of a continuum with one end as a dance community, drawn together by a shared activity, and the other as a transnational Irish population defined by its association with Ireland as a symbol. For most participants, their experience of the Irish dancing community includes both elements. For some however, one end of the spectrum may be a vivid reality and the other nearly absent from his or her overall experience of Irish dancing.

For nearly all participants of Irish dancing, in no matter what capacity, there has been an impact on the individual's identity. For some this has meant becoming an Irish dancer, a title that is fraught with associations from regional dance competitions to *Riverdance* on the world stage. For others, becoming a participant of Irish dancing has meant a strengthening of ties to other members of the transnational Irish community within the Canadian multi-cultural context as well as a deepening of one's sense of Irish heritage. While every individual will have a slightly different experience of Irish dancing, all participants do undergo a shift in their own identity in some way. For some

this is a significant change, while for others the shift is almost imperceptible. Still, no one emerges from Irish dancing without being touched by the experience.

6.3 A Vignette of Experience

My own experience of Irish dancing thus far has been a dynamic journey with many interesting moments along the way. This series of encounters has shaped my research, raising new questions and molding my knowledge of the dance. One encounter was particularly poignant, and for me, this chance meeting represents all of the elements of the Irish dancing experience.

After presenting a paper at a conference in Calgary, Alberta in the fall of 1999, all of the conference delegates were invited to attend a contra dance session organized by a local group. The army of delegates arrived at the town hall basement where the dancers were having their monthly gathering. I enjoyed the evening immensely as the contra dance was very similar to some of the figure/ceili dancing that I already knew how to do. As the evening progressed, I noticed a young girl of about ten years of age wearing Irish dancing shoes.

Shortly thereafter, there was a break in the formal dancing. Dancers were drinking water and snacking on goodies that one of the participants had brought. During the break, a few musicians, some of them conference delegates and others players for the dancing, had a jam session. As one tune began, I went over to the young girl and asked her if she wanted to dance a light jig with me. She looked at me puzzled, perhaps

wondering why I should ask her such a thing outside of the Irish dancing environment or how I even knew what a light jig was. She smiled and agreed, and we started to dance.

While our dances were not identical, they did employ the same basic steps. Soon we had attracted an audience, and the two of us performed a number of dances as the musicians honoured our requests of form: single jig, reel, slip jig. We finished our impromptu performance after about ten minutes and the contra dance resumed.

This meeting with the young dancer is etched in my mind as part of my Irish dancing experience. The vignette, however, does not end there. Over a year later, I was at a feis ceili in Edmonton and was dancing a progressive dance with another dancer from my school. As we danced with the various couples in the line, I recognized the young girl with whom I had danced at the contra dance in Calgary. As we approached one another with our partners, there was an initial moment of surprise over meeting again in this different venue. After that however, we smiled as we danced together for the rest of the segment before moving on to the next couple in the line.

These two meetings, for me, encapsulate the Irish dancing experience. The initial meeting took place outside of the normal Irish dancing venues, yet this young girl and I were still able to connect as Irish dancers. Because she was wearing Irish dancing shoes, I was able to recognize that she too was an Irish dancer. Still, because I had no visible marker of being a dancer, our connection did not occur until I asked her about the light jig. This insider knowledge of what type of dance, specifically what type of jig, should be performed to the music heard was her first indication that I was part of the Irish dancing community to which she belonged.

By performing a series of dances together, we were able to recognize the similarity in our steps that are part of the repertoire of Irish dancing, and also appreciate the slight differences that exist due to the fact that we had studied with different teachers. Because we had attracted a small audience in this encounter, our identity as Irish dancers was heightened. Linked by the common knowledge of the dance form and the ability to perform the various dances to the traditional music heard, we became representatives of Irish culture and the Irish dancing community.

The second meeting highlights the close nature of the Irish dancing community. Because this young dancer and I live in cities that are part of the same dancing region, it is not surprising that we should meet again. We attend the same competitions and will likely continue to meet at events for as long as we are both active in the community. Because we had never met before the contra dance but knew of each other's dancing schools, this meeting was for us, a case of an imagined community realized. This vignette, like so many others, occurred in only a short period of time but still encompassed the four main elements of the Irish dancing: the dance itself, the music, the culture, and the community.

6.4 What is left to be explored?

This study has focused on the overall experience of Irish dancing and its relationship to identity. There are many questions concerning Irish dancing that are beyond the scope of this study and remain unanswered. Two areas of interest that I would like to examine in the future are gender issues and adult dancers as a new

participant group. I am interested in exploring the role of gender in Irish dancing, a dance form that is dominated by women. This study would include an inquiry into the ratio of men to women in comparison with other forms of dance such as ballet, tap, jazz, and other forms of ethnic dance, as well as an examination of effects of gender on the development of the form.

Another area that needs to be addressed is the shift in the demographic makeup of the Irish dancing community and the growth of adult dancers as a participant group within this larger community. In the past decade the number of adult dancers has grown tremendously; this has impacted the Irish dancing community at large. Dance schools have grown in size, adding new classes for adult beginners. In the regional dance communities, feiseanna have altered their format, adding more competitions to accommodate this new participant group. One feis in Las Vegas has been created exclusively for adult dancers. These developments remain unexplored although they have already begun to impact the Irish dancing community at large.

In the decade following the premiere of *Riverdance*, a phenomenon that launched Irish dancing into the heart of popular culture, the Irish dancing community has shifted dramatically. At this point, it is still uncertain to what extent the Irish dancing community will continue to change, whether it will maintain this dramatic rate of change, or if the shifts will be less profound. In either case, it will be interesting to observe how this next stage in the development of Irish dancing and its community plays out, and how it will be manifest in the experience of those who call it their own.

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Appendix 1

Sorted by Set Dance Name			Sorted by Jigs then Hornpipes			
Set Dance	Min Speed	Type		Set Dance	Min Speed	Type
Ace and Deuce of Piping	76	Hornpipe	1	Blackthorn Stick	66	Jig
Blackbird	138	Hornpipe	2	Drunken Gauger (Funny Tailor)	66	Jig
Blackthorn Stick	66	Jig	3	Rub the Bag	66	Jig
Bonaparte's Retreat	76	Hornpipe	4	Three Sea Captains	66	Jig
Downfall of Paris	80	Hornpipe	5	Humours of Bandon	69	Jig
Drunken Gauger (Funny Tailor)	66	Jig	6	Hurling Boys	69	Jig
Garden of Daisies	76	Hornpipe	7	Hurry the Jug	69	Jig
Humours of Bandon	69	Jig	8	Jockey to the Fair	69	Jig
Hunt	76	Hornpipe	9	Miss Brown's Fancy	69	Jig
Hurling Boys	69	Jig	10	Orange Rogue	69	Jig
Hurry the Jug	69	Jig	11	Planxty Drury	69	Jig
Is The Big Man Within	113/73	Jig	12	Is The Big Man Within	73/113	Jig
Job of Journey Work	76	Hornpipe	13	St Patrick's Day	92	Jig
Jockey to the Fair	69	Jig	14	Ace and Deuce of Piping	76	Hornpipe
Kilkenny Races	80	Hornpipe	15	Bonaparte's Retreat	76	Hornpipe
King of the Fairies	80	Hornpipe	16	Garden of Daisies (Modern)	76	Hornpipe
Lodge Road	76	Hornpipe	17	Job of Journey Work	76	Hornpipe
Madame Bonaparte	80	Hornpipe	18	Blackbird	76	Hornpipe
Miss Brown's Fancy	69	Jig	19	Hunt	76	Hornpipe
Orange Rogue	69	Jig	20	Lodge Road	76	Hornpipe
Piper	76	Hornpipe	21	Piper	76	Hornpipe
Planxty Davis	80	Hornpipe	22	Rambling Rake	76	Hornpipe
Planxty Drury	69	Jig	23	White Blanket	76	Hornpipe
Rambling Rake	76	Hornpipe	24	Downfall of Paris	80	Hornpipe
Rodneys Glory	80	Hornpipe	25	Kilkenny Races	80	Hornpipe
Rub the Bag	66	Jig	26	King of the Fairies	80	Hornpipe
St Patrick's Day	92	Jig	27	Madame Bonaparte	80	Hornpipe
Three Sea Captains	66	Jig	28	Planxty Davis	80	Hornpipe
White Blanket	76	Hornpipe	29	Rodneys Glory	80	Hornpipe

Youghal Harbor	80	Hornpipe	30	Youghal Harbor	80	Horn- pipe
Open Reels	113			Reels Beg-Novice, Figures	116	
Open Slip Jigs	113			Light Jigs	116	
Open Treble Jig	73			Single Jigs	120	
Open Hornpipes	113			Slip Jigs Beg-Novice	116	
Treble Reels	113-120			Trad Treble Jig	92	
				Trad Hornpipe	144	

Bold font indicates traditional set dances.

2001.0008

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